



THE TALES OF
Book I
MARIELLE CLARAC

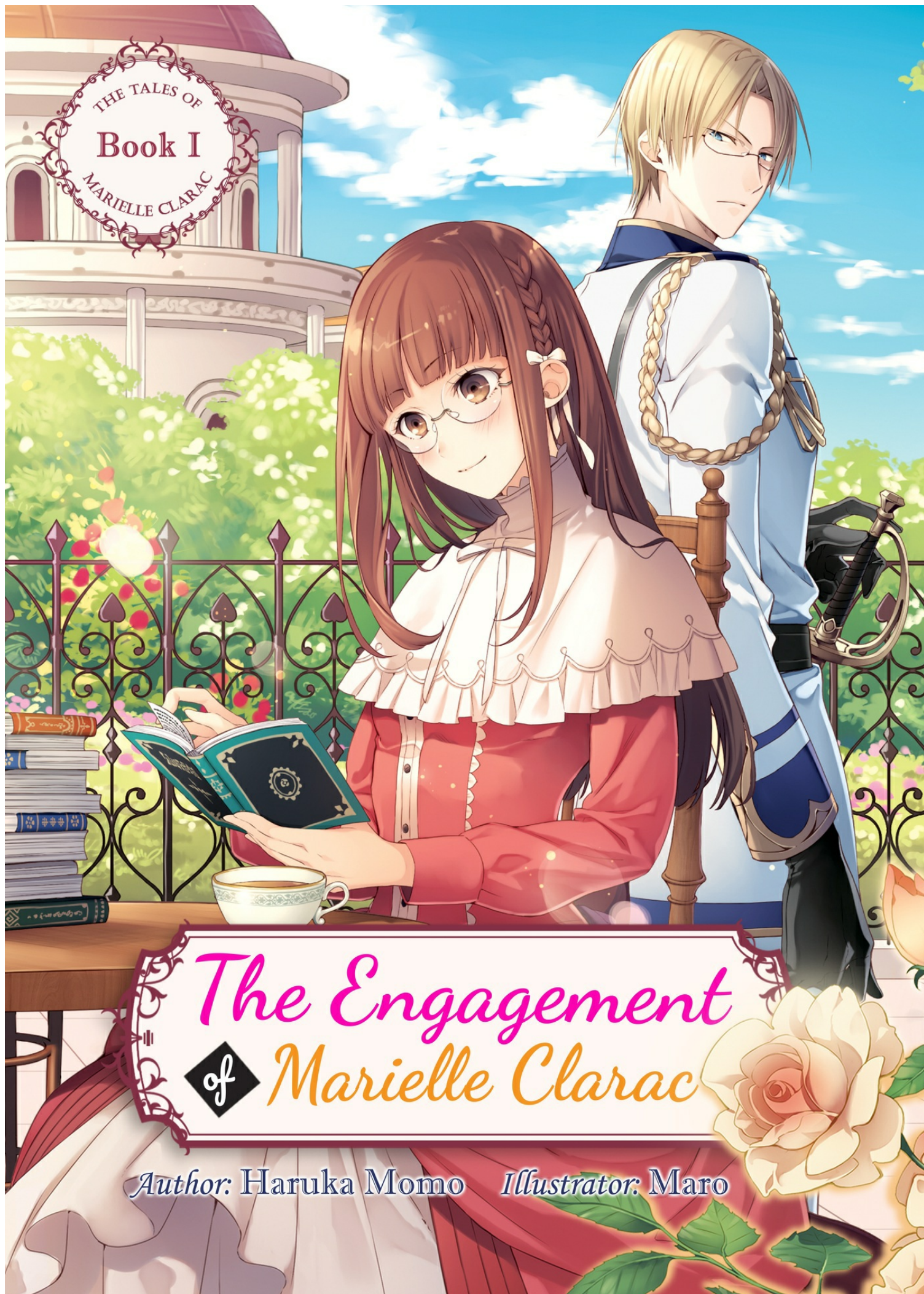
The Engagement
of *Marielle Clarac*

Author: Haruka Momo

Illustrator: Maro

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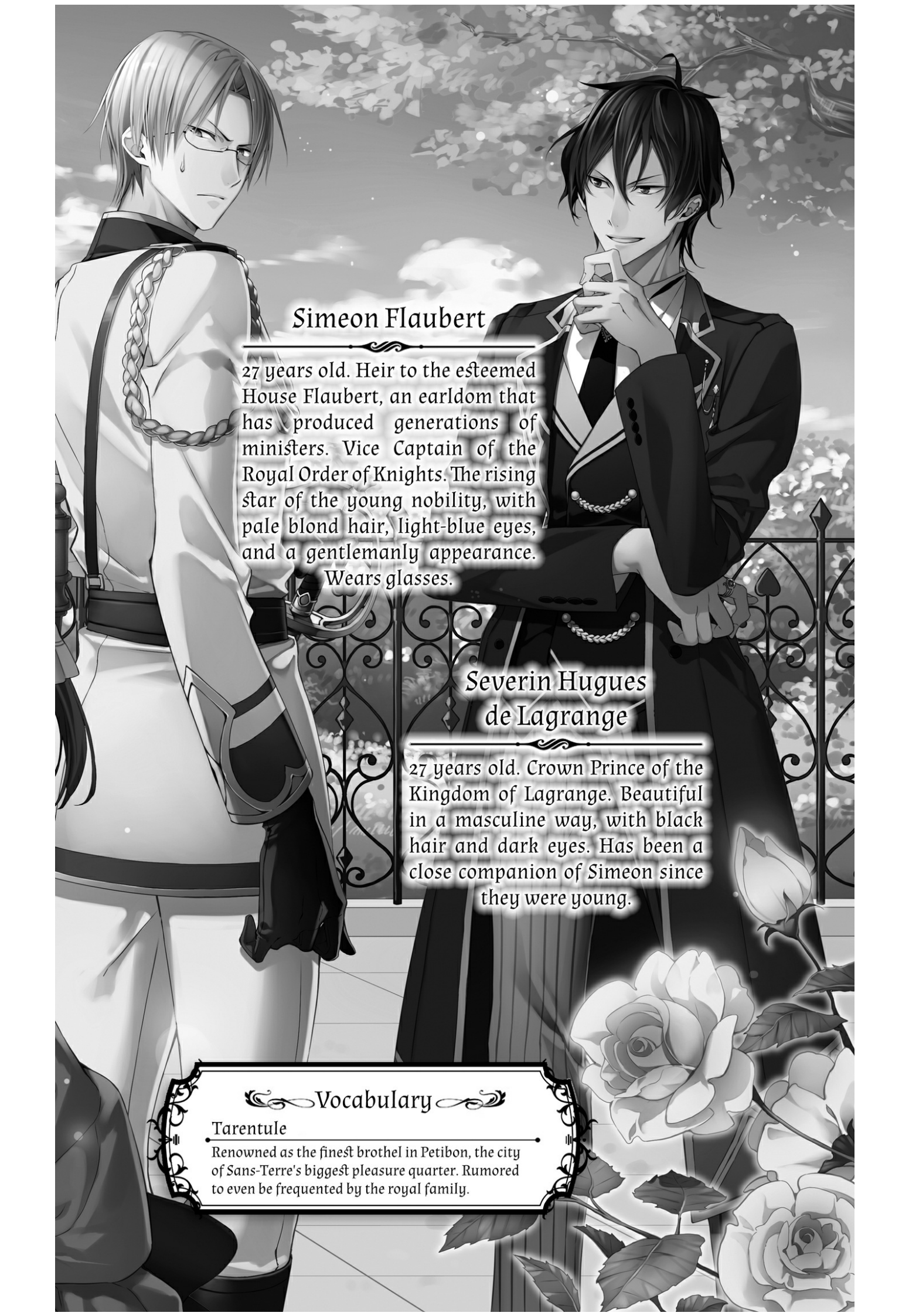


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The Engagement of Marielle Clarac

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Simeon Flaubert

27 years old. Heir to the esteemed House Flaubert, an earldom that has produced generations of ministers. Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. The rising star of the young nobility, with pale blond hair, light-blue eyes, and a gentlemanly appearance.

Wears glasses.

Severin Hugues de Lagrange

27 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. Has been a close companion of Simeon since they were young.

Vocabulary

Tarentule

Renowned as the finest brothel in Petibon, the city of Sans-Terre's biggest pleasure quarter. Rumored to even be frequented by the royal family.

✿ Julianne Sorel

Marielle's best friend. An avid reader who likes a rather specific type of content.

✿ Aurelia Cavaignac

Daughter of Marquess Cavaignac. Has blonde hair, green eyes, and stunningly good looks.

✿ Émile Clarac

Marielle's father, Viscount Clarac. Appears to be friendly and cordial, but has a hard-nosed side to him as well.

✿ Hubert van Leer

The new ambassador to Vissel, a neighboring country. A refined gentleman with a sense of humor.

✿ Albert Poisson

Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. Cheerful and amiable on the outside, but with a vicious streak underneath.

✿ Cedric Pautrier

The heir to House Pautrier, born to Earl Pautrier's second son and a woman of common birth. Handsome in a mild-mannered way.

✿ Patrice Bernier

Earl Pautrier's nephew. Seems to be facing some difficulties.

✿ Olga

One of the Three Flowers of Tarentule. An intellectual type with brown hair.

✿ Isabelle

One of the Three Flowers of Tarentule. A glamorous lady with red hair.

✿ Chloe

One of the Three Flowers of Tarentule. A blonde who presents a cutesy image.

✿ Agnès Vivier

An author of popular romance novels. Hugely popular amongst young noblewomen. Her true identity remains unknown.

✿ Lutin

A thief who is notorious not only in Lagrange, but in neighboring countries as well. He exclusively targets nobles and the wealthy, so he's quite popular amongst the lower classes.

Marielle Clarac

18 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac. Has brown hair, brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no particular stand-out qualities. She's so invisible to others that she uses her special skill of hiding in plain sight to observe other people and gather information.



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The Engagement of Marielle Clarac

Chapter One

I had made my debut into high society at the age of fifteen. Now, three years later, it was finally my turn to receive a marriage proposal.

At least, that's how things appeared to be playing out.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Marielle. My name is Simeon Flaubert."

This gentleman had come to visit my family so we could introduce ourselves to one another. He greeted me with a smile so beautiful and elegant it almost took me aback. He presented a small bouquet of flowers as a gift, and in my moment of surprise, he took my hand and kissed it. I could do no more than gaze upon his flowing movements in a dazed state.

"I am honored to make your acquaintance," he continued.

"The honor is entirely mine," I said, with some hesitation in my voice. "I'm Marielle Clarac. Thank you for coming. It's a pleasure to meet you." I returned his introduction and gave the customary curtsy in an entirely suitable manner, if I do say so myself. I believe I just barely managed to preserve the degree of social grace expected of a nobleman's daughter.

But in my mind, a storm was raging.

This situation is just...insane! It's Lord Simeon, of all people! The most vicious intellect of the Royal Order of Knights... the Smiling Sword... the Poisoned Petal! THAT Lord Simeon!

Although, when I mentioned these names in my father's presence, he responded with, "No, I've never heard him called anything like that."

Yes, all right, they're just my own names for him that I made up. Naturally, I'd never use them outside of my family. Even I can distinguish between things you can and can't say in polite company.

Anyway, back to Lord Simeon.

Lord Simeon was many things. He was the eldest son and heir of House Flaubert, an earldom with a history that stretched back to the founding of the kingdom. He was the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, foot guards to the royal family. Indeed, from a very young age he had been the close companion of His Highness the Crown Prince. He was, in fact, the premier rising star amongst the young nobility, with a career trajectory that many said assured him an important ministerial role in the future.

Those aspects alone would have been more than enough to attract the fevered attention of every young lady of marriageable age, but what truly made him seem like Prince Charming out of a storybook was his exceptionally beautiful outward appearance.

His physique was tall, slender, and perfectly proportioned. When a calm smile showed upon the pale face that bordered on the palest of blond hair, he exuded knowledge and noble character. His light blue eyes shone from behind his glasses with kindness, yes, but also a dignified strength and sharpness of wit.

At twenty-seven years of age, he possessed a calm and composed nature that was nothing like the boys of my own age group. He truly came across as an adult, and it was quite wonderful.

And people like that really exist? These pinnacles of perfection don't just exist in books, but in real life, too!?

And...one of them is going to marry me!?

I apologized to my father internally. Until that moment, I had honestly assumed he was joking about all this! I couldn't conceive of it being true! *Sorry for doubting you, Father!*

The truth, you see, is that this essentially *was* impossible. My father is a mere viscount, and our house has no particular history, status or fortune. Compared to House Flaubert, we existed in a different sphere altogether.

Admittedly, my father and brother had climbed to a certain level of success, both serving in the palace as government officials. However, they had not the faintest hope of becoming ministers. Our family simply did not have the

pedigree that would be needed to go that far. The gap between us and House Flaubert, which had produced generation after generation of ministers, even prime ministers, was akin to heaven and earth.

If this were indeed a story, there might have been some sort of secret fated reason for his proposal—for example, he might have seen me somewhere and fallen in love at first sight. However, I was absolutely, positively certain that this was not the case.

Why? Because my looks were so unremarkable that no one would ever give me a second glance.

What kind of trickery did Father use to reel in a catch like this? It must be the biggest coup of his entire career!

“I imagine you’ve heard from your father already, but I’ve presented myself as a candidate for your hand in marriage. Would you do me the honor of accepting my proposal?”

His voice was soft. Comfortable. I’d seen him from afar at countless balls and garden parties, but I’d never heard his voice before. A beautiful voice, befitting a beautiful face.

It was just slightly high-pitched, with a sweet tone when he spoke kindly, though I was certain that if he took on a colder tone it would make quite an impact as well. Soft and flowing, yet merciless when interrogating someone... Just imagining it made me start to breathe heavily.

Ah, to be interrogated by him, just once!

“Marielle!” whispered my father from behind, poking me in the back.

Oops, this won’t do at all! Now’s not the time to be daydreaming. I hurriedly pulled myself together and gave Lord Simeon an answer. “This honor is far more than I deserve. However, I must ask you, Lord Simeon, is this truly what you want? As you can see, I’m neither a stunning beauty nor a brilliant mind. In fact, I’m a woman with no distinguishing characteristics whatsoever. The plainest, plainest, plainest of the plain.”

Father pressed his finger to his forehead, as if to stifle a groan of frustration.

Perhaps I was a bit too frank. But it was important. There was every chance that this encounter would end just like all the others, with the suitor completely losing interest the moment he saw my face. I had to make certain.

My older brother, apparently of the same mindset, had no look of reproach on his face. My mother, meanwhile, was so captivated by Lord Simeon that she seemed not to be listening at all.

“If your feelings have changed,” I continued, “please feel free to say so. I’m quite used to it, so it won’t cause me any consternation.” I wasn’t planning to start any misguided arguments about it afterward, so I didn’t bother mincing words.

Rather than expressing any surprise, Lord Simeon let out the slightest of chuckles. “Come, there’s no need to talk like that. I find your appearance quite lovely. I’ve also heard that you have a very sharp mind.”

Father! You’ve been exaggerating, haven’t you!? A great deal, by the sound of it! I stole a fleeting glimpse at Father, who was shaking his head furiously. It’s too late for that now! I get that you’ve got to present things in the best light in case people pass up a good thing, but what kind of expectations must Lord Simeon have now!? If you overdo it and give him ridiculous expectations, I’ll be the one who suffers for it later!

“I must disagree... Though it pains me to say so, I am an uninteresting woman with no particular merits. I am capable of the same things any average person can do, but little beyond that.” I paused a moment. “So you see, I’m certain that I’d only disappoint you. And to be told later that I’d disappointed you would be regrettable for me as well, so if you intend to change your mind, I’d appreciate it if you did so at this juncture.”

“Marielle, is that really necessary?” said Mother, suddenly coming back to life and cutting into the conversation after her time spent being entranced by Lord Simeon’s sheer handsomeness. “It’s clear that he wishes for your hand, and not a moment too soon! All this groveling is rude!”

Mother, no matter how stunning he is, it’s still me he’s getting engaged to, not you...

She continued, “When you’re told something as wonderful as this, it’s not the

time to start fussing. It's better to work hard at improving the aspects in which you fall short. What's the use of giving up from the very first moment?"

Mother had a point. If I let this fine gentleman slip through my fingers, there was a real risk that I'd never get another marriage proposal ever again.

I'd never seen such an intense look on her face before. It was kind of scary.
"Mother, I..."

"Do you find me unsuitable as a partner, Miss Marielle? Am I not to your satisfaction?" Lord Simeon's sweet voice cut off the confrontation between mother and daughter. I returned my gaze to him and a shiver ran down my spine.

His smile... I can't bear it! And his facial expression... It hides the slightest of sadistic streaks, as if he wants to tease me, no, torment me! I'm getting dizzy! How can one man come across as so dignified, yet so sensual at the same time?

Endless depths lay hidden beneath his sweet smile. What was he thinking inside, as his lips formed words that could melt a woman's heart? Complex beyond compare, not straightforward or easy to pin down at all... *Yes, that's it! That's Lord Simeon all over!*

Everybody knew, you see. Every single noble in the entire Kingdom of Lagrange.

They knew that the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights had a beautiful and friendly exterior, but was actually, in stark contrast, an exceptionally cool-headed and sometimes even severe military man—and a tactician of unparalleled skill.

Just because someone is always ready with a kind smile and a warm word is no reason to dismiss him as not being a threat. There were plenty of fools who scorned him, thought of him as a mere weakling, and all of them suffered for it. Indeed, his high rank was not earned solely on the basis of his noble lineage.

The soft and gentle Vice Captain who closely assists the tough and manly Captain.

The owner of an outstanding intellect.

It doesn't get much more classic than this. I love it! I just can't resist his sheer undercurrent of black-hearted scheming! It hits exactly the right spot to set off my fangirl urges!

Thank you, Father! I can't believe I get to spend the rest of my life observing exactly the thing I love at close range! I'm so happy!

I no longer had any other choice. It seemed that Lord Simeon truly intended to marry me. Naturally, I still had my doubts about the reasoning behind his proposal, but I couldn't worry about that any longer. All I could think about was obeying my fangirl instincts and taking the hand he had offered me.

Reason was gone, and all I had were my feelings. No...my desires. No one had ever set my heart racing like this before. *How could I pass up a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity like this!?*

"Marielle Clarac, will you marry me?"

His question felt just like a declaration of love. I nodded, enraptured by this proposal out of a dream.

"If you'll have me...I would like that very much."

And that was the beginning of my engagement to Lord Simeon.

Chapter Two

The eldest son and heir of House Flaubert had lived twenty-seven years without a single rumor surfacing that in any way associated him with the young lady who had apparently captured his heart.

Confusion reigned. After all, the groom-to-be had been a source of gossip since time immemorial. People admired him, wanted him, expected much of him, and had great curiosity about whom he'd marry. When he finally announced his engagement, astonishment spread through high society like a shockwave.

And when they heard that his fiancée was Viscount Clarac's daughter Marielle, the response of most people was presumably to furrow their brows in befuddlement.

Even if one knew the name of House Clarac, it would be entirely unsurprising to have no recollection of what kind of person the daughter of that family was. She was a plain girl who didn't stand out at all, and left no particular impression, as if she was made of air.

"She" being "me," of course.

Which is precisely why I became such a target of curiosity. I was a mystery woman that no one knew a thing about.

As the cries of "Surely she's some kind of hidden beauty?" reached a crescendo, the day finally came for me to show myself at a public occasion alongside Lord Simeon, at which point I felt all eyes on me from every corner of the room to such an extent that I even feared for my safety. Were I to have attended on my own, I imagine I'd have fled straight back home, shaking in terror.

First came the moment when they noticed me: "It's her! She's the one!" Then came the very next moment, when all those assembled were left with blank faces, having lost any trace of interest in me.

You could almost read their thoughts: “Really? That’s it? Surely there must be some mistake, and she’s merely the opening act?”

I understood their feelings of doubt and bewilderment perfectly. “Sorry, but this is it,” I longed to reply. “I don’t really understand how I ended up in this situation either!” Even at that very moment, I couldn’t make much sense of it.

I was an uninteresting young lady whose rank was not especially high, whose family pedigree put her decidedly in the middle of the pack, and who had no particular characteristics that stood out. The number of people dissatisfied to hear that Lord Simeon’s fiancée was such a person might have numbered not in the dozens, but the hundreds.

Naturally, I also had the pleasure of hearing cutting remarks and sarcastic comments from all directions. Wherever I went, I was forced to endure the humiliation of their sneers as they spoke ill of me behind my back. It even became an everyday occurrence for people to mock me to my face.

Even on a very special night indeed—the night of a ball held at the royal palace—the same familiar tale began to unfold.

“I must apologize for leaving you unattended.”

Lord Simeon had been detained for rather a long time by various acquaintances who sought his attention, but at last he had drawn things to a close and returned to my side.

I took the small notebook lying open in my lap and placed it back into my embroidered handbag. The hurriedly written contents were not for other people’s eyes, so I hid it and greeted Lord Simeon with a mask of composure. “You needn’t worry about me. You have so many people to talk to, it wouldn’t do for you to pass the time in such a leisurely manner as I have. Is there no one else with whom you need to exchange greetings?”

He’d brought me a drink on his way back, which I politely accepted. I’d already had three glasses while I waited, and was almost full to bursting. *I should have paced myself!*

“No, I’ve finished dealing with everyone important, and I’ve had quite enough of people starting conversations under the pretext of congratulating me on my

engagement.”

I giggled. “It must be a nuisance, being so popular.”

“I might say the same about you. You appear to have been talking to quite a variety of people yourself.” With a calm smile that revealed the barest hint of mischievousness, Lord Simeon sat down beside me.

Gosh, I thought. He noticed.

He had noticed the barrage of cruelty I’d been subjected to every time we’d been in public together. Had he been keeping an eye on me all along this evening, too?

Trust the Vice Captain to have no blind spots! *No doubt the men of the Royal Order of Knights don’t realize he’s keeping an eagle eye on them every day as well, while all he shows is nonchalance. How wonderful!*

“In my case, almost every conversation was about you, Lord Simeon. Everyone has a great deal of curiosity.”

He responded to my light giggling with a warm smile. From the outside, I’m sure it looked like a friendly and lighthearted chat between two people engaged to be married—though I was certain that all watching were disappointed at the female partner being an unbefittingly plain young woman in glasses.

The glasses weren’t part of any effort to imitate Lord Simeon, if that’s what you’re wondering. I’d worn glasses since long before our engagement. My eyesight isn’t so poor as to prevent me from going about my daily life if I take them off, but removing them does make it difficult to tell exactly who’s standing in front of me. If I lost them, it would be a bit inconvenient.

I value practicality over vanity. If I can’t observe other people, there’s no point in me attending social gatherings.

“I’ve found the same thing,” Lord Simeon replied. “I had some inkling beforehand, but I’d never have expected an engagement to draw this much attention.”

“It’s because it’s *your* engagement, Lord Simeon. They’re all dying to know what kind of person you’ve chosen to marry. I suspect they’ve been wondering

who it would be all your life.”

“Still, it’s quite troublesome for everyone to be expressing their curiosity so frankly about such a personal matter.” He let out an exasperated sigh and adjusted his glasses.

Unlike mine, Lord Simeon’s glasses didn’t diminish his appeal in the slightest. They only made him look that much more wonderful. When his eyes suddenly narrowed behind the lenses, his smile took on a sense of coldness that made my breath quicken before I knew it.

Even his glasses are so enchanting that they lead my thoughts straight into pervert territory! He’s just so perfect! I don’t think anyone could ever embody my ideal man the way he does! I wonder if he’d agree to hold a riding crop or something for me, just briefly as a prop! Oh, but if he did that, I’m sure I’d get an intense nosebleed!

“Marielle?”

I’d intended to wear a benign smile, but perhaps my inner squeals of joy had leaked through. Lord Simeon bent down slightly and peered at me.

Oh no, did he somehow get an unpleasant feeling from my inappropriate thoughts? If he looked directly at me and silently pressured me for an answer with the full force of his smile, I don’t think I could bear it. He’d leave me panting!

As we locked eyes—as I fought to hide my nerves and my arousal—a voice interrupted us.

“Still the perfect happy couple, I see.”

It was a pretty voice with a youthful tone. We both returned to how we’d been sitting and looked towards its source. The moment Lord Simeon saw who was walking towards us, he rose to his feet. With belated awkwardness, I stood as well.



“You look like you’ve been lovebirds for years. I never expected you to become one of those people, Simeon! I’m shocked, to be honest.”

The young gentleman smiled and affably poked fun while I greeted him with the deepest of curtsies. Lord Simeon laughed bitterly. “Don’t you tease me as well, Your Highness. I’m already thoroughly defeated by all the comments I’ve received today.”

“Those who are happy in love have a duty to put up with all the jealousy coming from single people, I suppose!”

“You’re hardly one to be saying that. If it’s that easy, perhaps it’s time for you to finally choose a marriage partner, Your Highness. Stop turning everyone down based on frivolous complaints and put yourself in the same uncomfortable position as me.”

“Sadly, in my case I can’t choose whomever I like based purely on preference. I’m envious of how much freedom you have.”

The man Lord Simeon was engaging in intimate conversation with was none other than Severin, the crown prince. He was the same age as Lord Simeon—twenty-seven—and I’d heard that the two of them got along very well and spent a lot of time together even outside of their official duties. Lord Simeon had apparently been introduced to His Highness when they were very young, with the intention that they should become school friends. However, I sensed that their friendship wasn’t only the result of political maneuvering, but rather that true closeness existed between them.

This was another reason I was the target of so much envy. Who wouldn’t seek the hand of such a close confidant of the future king? It would guarantee both a secure future and a tremendous amount of influence.

How in the world did Father secure a man like this for me? He couldn’t have found something compromising and blackmailed him, could he...? If he tried to use a tactic like that on Lord Simeon, House Clarac would end up crushed to bits!

I was certain it couldn’t be possible, but decided to check later, just in case. Even if a plot twist like that would excite me as a fangirl, I didn’t want to experience it in person.

I'd already introduced myself to Prince Severin earlier, as soon as I'd entered the hall, so there was no need for me to speak at this point. Rather than interrupting their conversation, I stayed silent and listened. *I have to turn into air so I don't disturb them.* A moment later, I took a few steps back to maintain a proper distance.

It's usually not appropriate for someone of my rank to come so close to His Highness. I had to make sure I didn't conduct myself in an overly familiar manner. The only reason I could be so close at that moment was because Lord Simeon was present.

In any case, forcing myself into their conversation would be counterproductive. I didn't want to do anything stupid like that.

Prince Severin's black hair, dark eyes, and tougher, more masculine appearance struck a stark contrast with Lord Simeon's pale blond hair, light blue eyes, and gentle, yet somehow shrewd manner. Seeing the two dashing handsome opposites right next to each other was like looking at a picture.

Yes, I thought, books in that genre do have illustrations along these lines. They could easily be the main characters of that kind of story.

My preference is for boy-girl romance, so I tend not to read those kinds of books, but I don't particularly consider them to be outside of my range either. They tend to have my favorite type of character in them as well, so it would be a waste if I didn't explore those too. I've borrowed and read quite a few volumes and pride myself on being quite familiar with the genre.

At first glance, it looks like His Highness would be the top and Lord Simeon would be the bottom, but I actually feel that with this pairing, Lord Simeon as the top would be the more classic approach. A prince who's normally tough and commanding, but sometimes his mild-mannered underling takes charge in an aggressive way, reversing the roles... A classic take on master/servant.

I felt sure that my best friend stood somewhere in this hall, struggling to contain a nosebleed. Probably very close by indeed. It was partly for her sake that I didn't want to do anything as boorish as interrupt their conversation.

Even if they can't talk about it in public, I think there are a lot of ladies, young and old, who share my friend's taste. I wanted all of them to be able to admire

and appreciate this beautiful spectacle!

“Marielle?”

Oh, what is it? Lord Simeon’s forceful smile is turned towards me once again. Could he have sensed something? I’d expect no less from the Vice Captain. His keen wits are so wonderful.

“Your fiancée is so meek and well-behaved. In fact, she’s almost too quiet. You’d forget she’s even there.”

I responded to Prince Severin’s words with nothing more than a reserved chuckle.

Yes, precisely, I thought. That’s exactly my special skill.

Pushing my plain and inconspicuous nature to the limit so that no one pays me any attention, allowing me to watch other people and listen intently to their conversations. I’ve achieved excellent results from this approach. I’m mainly acting for my own enjoyment and my own profit, but I’ve occasionally gathered information I can pass on to my father and brother. After all, if I can be useful for their work, it makes my life more comfortable in the end.

However, recently this had become more difficult. Since my engagement to Lord Simeon, I’d become a focal point for eyes and ears, so I couldn’t proceed in the same manner as before.

I wondered if I needed to change my approach. Perhaps, I mused, there was even a way to turn my new position to my advantage and use it to gain information I could never access before.

“Sorry to interrupt! Ah, so this is Lord Simeon’s new fiancée!” A cheerful voice resonated as an older man approached—one I hadn’t seen before.

I racked my brain to think who it was. After three years spent diligently attending functions and observing the attendees, I had a relatively thorough knowledge of the kingdom’s nobility. *I have no recollection of seeing him at all... Perhaps he’s from a foreign land.*

He appeared to be roughly in his forties, with a fine, upstanding appearance. He was tall and very handsome. His reddish-brown hair, smoothed down in a

very tidy fashion, had some flecks of white mixed in, which I was glad to see as they gave him an appropriate level of refinement suitable for his age.

Lord Simeon met him with a smile. “So even you’ve become a victim of curiosity, Lord Van Leer?” This apparently sufficed as a greeting, and the other gentleman showed no signs of taking it badly.

“Apologies. If my ill-mannered curiosity has caused any offense, allow me to express my deepest regrets. It’s just that I’ve grown very intrigued about what type of person she is, having heard all the gossip flying about. Won’t you introduce me to her?”

“Oh dear, you are indeed firmly in its clutches. Marielle, this is Hubert van Leer. He recently arrived as the new ambassador from Vissel.”

Aha, so he’s an ambassador from a neighboring country. Now that I think about it, I had heard mention that a new one had just arrived.

I gave Ambassador Hubert a curtsy. “Marielle Clarac. It’s a pleasure and an honor to make your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure is all mine. I’m glad I am able to meet you. My, what a sweet and innocent young lady you are. You appear to have taken all the bite out of Lord Simeon, too.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I replied, glossing over the situation with an elegant giggle.

Of course I haven’t, I thought to myself. This is an engagement he agreed upon with my father without even seeing my face. To Lord Simeon, I’m nothing more than the daughter of House Clarac.

If I’d been an exceptional beauty, or blessed with any special skills, that might have been fertile ground for romance...but alas, I was just a plain girl in glasses. I didn’t have the slightest expectation of any development along those lines.

Nor did I have any problem with that. Lord Simeon was treating me exactly as a fiancée should be treated, and I had neither any wish for anything further, nor any particular interest.

It’s you that I’m interested in right now, Ambassador Hubert.

“You think so too?” said the crown prince. “I must say, I’m exceedingly surprised to see Simeon fawning like this over a woman.”

“It’s not how he normally behaves?” asked the ambassador.

“Not at all. Don’t be fooled by how he looks—on the inside he’s a harsh man. Many a girl has given him an amorous glance, but all they ever got back was a cold and indifferent smile.”

“Goodness. Then meeting Miss Marielle must have been some kind of fated encounter.”

“You might be right. She must be his destined companion, as decreed by God. As far as I can tell, they really are suited to one another.”

Lord Simeon cut in: “Your Highness, Ambassador, could you please refrain from going so far? You’re making this whole matter seem far too grandiose.”

Their exchange of jokes and diplomatic comments rose in intensity. Then the conversation wended its way towards the political sphere. Out of habit, I stood a few steps back and quietly observed.

I am air. I am an object.

On the surface I was the docile fiancée, keeping my proper place by refraining from butting into the men’s conversation.

All the while, I was merely blending into my surroundings, alerting no one to my presence, while I listened in on everything they discussed. I wasn’t about to let this precious opportunity go to waste. I did my utmost to hold every new piece of information in my mind.

I could have screamed. *If only I could write it all down in my notebook! Will I ever be able to remember it all? I must try my hardest.* Names I knew were dropped one after another, though some of the connections between them were new to me, and unexpected.

This is...delicious...

I savored all the new information. It was the rare kind that you can only hear in the upper echelons of the kingdom. No half-measures here. They couldn’t broach topics of a truly secret nature while conversing in public like this, but

nonetheless, for me the information was the most valuable treasure imaginable.

The discussion reached its end, and Ambassador Hubert broke away. I took that opportunity to leave Lord Simeon and His Highness and make my way to the ladies room.

First and foremost, I attended to the call of nature. Then, in the powder room, I retrieved the notebook from my handbag.

My notebook—the most important tool for my work. I carry it with me wherever I go, just in case I’m able to gather any source material I can use. I rushed to scribble the words down before I forgot any of the conversation I’d just heard.

Royal court romance and politics are inextricably linked. Putting in a serious chapter full of intrigue is a guaranteed way to give a story more depth. However, this element is hard to write based on imagination alone, so using real events as a reference lends a story authenticity, making it much more interesting.

I’m so happy. To think I’d end up in a privileged position like this...

I was eternally grateful to my father, and resolved to repay him as a good daughter should: by sharing the parts of the information I’d gathered that seemed likely to be advantageous for him.

I wrote intently with all my focus on the page, but it still took a great deal of time to cover everything. Afterward, I closed the notebook and looked at myself in the elaborately decorated mirror.

The reflection staring back at me was that of a mediocre young lady with youth as her only redeeming feature.

Brown hair, brown eyes. I did look slightly younger than my years, but I suspected the modest makeup and hairstyle could be credited for that. And there, squarely in the middle of my face, sat my huge glasses. If I removed those, I thought, I might warrant being described as at least vaguely attractive.

No wonder I’d become the subject of malicious gossip from all quarters. For such an unappealing girl to sit by Lord Simeon’s side looked so mismatched as

to be comical. Even Ambassador Hubert and Prince Severin's attempts at flattery were too artless to be taken as more than false charm.

I wondered what Lord Simeon was thinking. Regardless of how much he might have been drawn to me when discussing the matter with Father, surely after meeting me he was disappointed to realize that someone so essential—his wife—would be a person like me? Or did he just have uncommonly low expectations? There are people like that who place more emphasis on the conditions of the arrangement, and want their wife to be nothing more than a virtuous woman who preserves his family line.

If he felt like it, Lord Simeon could have had more than his fill of romance. Perhaps, I considered, he was of the mindset that marriage was for his house, and personal pleasure was a separate matter, to be enjoyed with a different partner.

Thinking too hard about this did make me feel slightly lonely, but I could hardly expect anything else. Such arrangements are commonplace in high society, and the most I could ask for was to find a husband, one who would treat me well, while I was still of marriageable age. Fulfilling my obligations first, and then pursuing the things I enjoyed. That, I'd decided, was my path to a happy life, and I was quite content with it.

I quickly finished reapplying my makeup, then stood up and tried to leave. However, I was left tilting my head in confusion, my hand still resting on the doorknob.

How odd. It won't open.

The door only locked from the inside, so it couldn't have been that. I was able to open the door just enough to have a small gap to peek through. It appeared that someone had put string around the outside doorknob and tied it to something.

I'd clearly been far too dedicated to my craft. In my state of fixation, I hadn't even noticed when I was subjected to this cruel trick.

In any case, I was sure the perpetrator must be a young lady of some noble house or other.

This was not my first such experience. The people who were satisfied with merely talking ill of me were the good ones. Indeed, those who used force to harass me were numerous as well! Merely trapping me in a room was child's play. The time someone soiled my favorite dress had left me feeling quite defeated, but this situation hardly impacted me at all.

I shrugged my shoulders and walked over to the window. *They didn't exactly try very hard to keep me in here*, I thought. Even with the door blocked, the room had a large window, and was situated on the ground floor. Leaving wouldn't present even the slightest inconvenience.

I opened the window and looked around. All I saw outside was the darkened garden spread out before me. As far as I could tell, there were no signs of life.

But am I really alone?

I wondered if there might be someone waiting for the precise moment I climbed through the window, ready to point and laugh at my vulgar behavior. However, upon further consideration, I realized that anyone hiding in the garden purely to witness my behavior would themselves be rather vulgar.

Perhaps the fine young ladies who did this could not even conceive of me rolling up the hem of my dress and clambering through the window...despite it being the only other option if the door couldn't be used.

I kept a tight grip on that pesky hem and stepped onto the window ledge with a heave-ho. Careful not to catch or step on my dress, I slipped through and descended into the night.

I unrolled my hem, quick as I could, then took a glance at my surroundings. There appeared to be no one there after all. *Unless they've been hiding in the garden all along, and intend to spread malicious gossip about me later. But so what? I can always turn around and say that I'd been trapped inside, so I had no choice but to exit through the window.*

A few people might laugh at me, I considered, but that would be fine. It's not like I was used to being praised and admired anyway. If I were so sensitive that this degree of mockery caused me grave insult, I'd never have been able to agree to Lord Simeon's marriage proposal.

It was past time for me to return to the hall, so I walked through the garden, wondering where exactly one could enter the building. I found myself walking along the wall searching for an entrance, marveling at the sheer size of the palace.

I was rapidly getting further and further from the hall without coming across anything resembling a doorway. Perhaps I was meant to go in the other direction? And yet, after coming so far, turning on my heel and going back the other way was not an appealing prospect.

I wondered if I might happen upon a knight who was standing guard. He might accuse me of suspicious behavior, but I'd be able to explain the circumstances and he might be kind enough to give me directions. *Although ideally, I'd rather find the entrance myself before it comes to that.*

Suddenly I sensed other people nearby, and stopped.

From the shrubbery that extended further into the garden, I heard hushed voices and sounds. *If there are people nearby, the entrance can't be far. Perhaps they'll tell me where it is? But what could they be up to in this desolate darkness?* I realized that if I rushed in without thinking, it might end very badly for me.

Hiding myself behind the shrubbery, I tiptoed closer to the voices. I couldn't simply leave as if I hadn't noticed anything. If someone was having a secret rendezvous, I had to investigate it thoroughly.

Not so that I could start spreading rumors—just so I could obtain a new piece of information for its own sake. I couldn't let the chance slip away. Not when I didn't know what they were discussing, or how it could be useful.

The hushed voices started coming closer.

They were both male. *Oh, then it can't be a rendezvous. Unless they're...those kinds of men? No, that's absurd, it's totally impossible! ...Or is it?*

Though I shrank back in fear, I didn't run away. I sensed a menacing atmosphere, and I was too curious to leave now.

"That's not what we discussed!"

They seemed to be arguing. Perhaps the kind of lovers' tiff that you only get from true blind passion? Or a break-up gone wrong? In fact, there seemed to be more than two people making noise and talking in raised voices. *Oho, maybe a love triangle? No, still impossible.*

My heart began racing. Suddenly, someone screamed. I jumped with a start in my hiding place.

Wh...What? Bloodshed? That's a much more dramatic plot twist than I expected...

"Hurry up and do it! The guards are coming!"

"Dammit, he won't keep still!"

"S-stop...!" And then a stifled cry of pain.

I had no idea what to do. It seemed as if a murder was about to be committed right in front of me. Standing idly by and doing nothing to help would of course be straying from the correct moral path. And yet, I knew I didn't have the physical strength to jump in and save the poor victim. If I acted too carelessly, I'd get swept up in the events and be murdered myself.

I dashed away from the scene, got a bit closer to the building, and picked up a conveniently placed large rock from the ground. Then I gathered all my strength and threw it at a nearby window.

The window shattered with a thunderous *crash*.

I got another rock and did it once more for good measure. Another deafening *crash*.

The knights on guard heard the noises and ran over straight away.

"What is this!"

"What do you think you're doing!"

I clung onto the first knight that arrived, and feigned sobbing. "I was...so scared...! I don't know what happened, but someone just leapt out from the darkness! They ran that way!"

As I appealed to the knight, I pointed towards the shrubbery. The people

who'd been fighting had to be either holding their breath or running away already. *Hopefully they gave up on the murder, I thought. I hope I acted in time.*

The knights went to investigate the area. I waited next to the building, under both surveillance and protection.

Then I heard my name being called.

"Marielle!" Lord Simeon ran toward me. I was impressed by how quickly he made it to the scene. Nothing less from the Vice Captain!

"Lord Simeon!" I jumped on him as if my salvation had arrived. I couldn't stand being treated with suspicion here. I needed to make those around me accept that I was only an innocent passerby.

"What exactly were you doing here?" he asked. "You'd been gone for quite a while, so I thought I'd look for you."

Oops, it seems I caused him quite some inconvenience. Sorry about that!

"I'm sorry, I was trapped in the powder room, but I somehow managed to climb through the window. Then I got lost trying to find the way back in, and happened upon a strange commotion!"

"Indeed, the door to the powder room had been tied shut from the outside. I saw that you must have been trapped inside."

He even knows about that?

He continued, "What kind of commotion?"

"I'm not sure exactly... I heard some noises, and someone leapt out from the darkness all of a sudden. Then the windows got smashed, and...I just ran away in shock."

I insisted that things had happened so suddenly, they were all a blur, and emphasized that I was a mere passerby with no knowledge of the situation. Which wasn't entirely untrue, of course. I still didn't really know what had happened.

One of the knights who'd gone to investigate came over to report to Lord Simeon. They hadn't found anyone, but they did find a fresh bloodstain. Which meant the person they were after had run away as well. *Thank goodness! I*

prevented the murder!

This consequently proved my innocence as well. Had nothing been found at all, I'd have been treated as someone causing a scene of my own volition. I'm sure at the very least I'd have been reproached rather severely for breaking the windows.

After that I was questioned further and asked again exactly what had happened, but I persisted in telling them that my presence was a mere coincidence, and I had no idea whatsoever. I couldn't risk saying anything when I couldn't yet judge what was safe to tell them.

Before long, I was allowed to go, having been deemed an unfortunate young lady caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. I returned to the hall, at which point my best friend came straight over, looking very worried about me. After assuring himself that I wasn't being left on my own, Lord Simeon went to report to the crown prince. He ended up joining the investigation himself, so I left with my friend and returned home on my own.

I explained it all to my father and brother the next day. When I told them everything I'd been able to glean, they handled the matter for me with great gusto. In the end, it turned out to be a government official who'd taken part in a corrupt cover-up, fallen out with his co-conspirators, and was being silenced. Definitely not a lovers' tiff, then.

I hadn't seen who it was, but given this information, I was able to surmise his identity from his voice. The man being assaulted was one of my brother's colleagues. At one point he'd even been presented to me as a possible marriage partner. However, he refused me, so it never progressed to a formal proposal. Despite that, his face and voice remained etched into my memory.

I also had my suspicions about who the would-be murderers were, but I couldn't confirm this with any degree of certainty, so I left it up to my father and brother to draw their conclusions. I wouldn't have wanted to inadvertently subject anyone to questioning based purely on an educated guess with no evidence.

However, my guess did turn out to be correct. The men's corruption was uncovered and they were charged with the crime.

For everyone in the royal court, this incident was something of a minor scandal. However, for me the whole experience was honestly rather exciting.

I told my best friend as much a few days after the ball. “I knew the palace would be a treasure trove of inspiration! The sordid nature of human relationships always breeds political intrigue! And what better breeding ground than the palace, where a lavish exterior hides everyday lives full of scandal and cruelty! Calling it ‘fun’ wouldn’t do it justice. It was incredible!”

“I can’t believe you’re in such high spirits after going through something like that,” said my friend in response to my gushing. “If your plan hadn’t worked, you might not have lived to tell the tale!”

“True, I suppose. I’m glad there was something of a thrilling twist, but I’m also glad I didn’t get hurt.”

“That goes without saying! These circumstances were of an entirely different caliber than the unkind trickery of the other young ladies.”

Despite her lecturing and her look of exasperation, Julianne was in fact keenly interested in hearing every detail of my experience. I gave her a full recap of my earlier misfortune of being trapped in the powder room as well.

“That must have been Lady Aurelia and her cohorts,” she said. “They left the hall shortly after you did, as if to follow you. Though I was sure you’d manage to deal with whatever they had in mind.”

“Indeed, it caused me no difficulty whatsoever. I only wonder at their lack of follow-through. The door was obstructed, but they made no attempt at preventing me from opening the window.”

“I doubt they had any idea that you might use the window. They’d never dream of doing such a thing themselves.”

“Well, excuse me for being such a disgraceful lout of a woman. I just didn’t see any point in sobbing helplessly. There was a clear way out, so I used it.”

“Lady Aurelia and her friends certainly didn’t realize their opponent was someone so brazen,” Julianne said, with a shrug. She knew that no matter how many biting remarks or cruel tricks I was subjected to, I would never have just put up with them, so she also wasn’t overly worried about me.

“I’m actually more grateful to those girls than anything. That kind of bullying may be cliché, but if the exact form it takes comes purely from one’s imagination, the way it unfolds will really feel nothing more than perfunctory. If I can write it based on a real experience, the plot will feel much more urgent, don’t you think? They’ve given me such good material, I almost want to thank them in person. And Lord Simeon as well, of course!”

I had to laugh. *If anyone else knew that the sheer variety of attacks I’ve borne since my engagement to Lord Simeon actually make me thankful every day to the ladies who perpetrate them, I’m sure I’d be thought of as quite a degenerate!*

And I’d never have had all these experiences with any other suitor. This was all because I was engaged to Lord Simeon. I was grateful both to the young noblewomen, and to him.

“So you intend to use this as source material, too?” asked Julianne, thumbing through the book in her hand. It was the latest book, freshly arrived from the publisher.

“Of course. But if I stick to the facts it wouldn’t be exciting enough, so I do plan to dress it up a bit. Perhaps the young lady gets caught up in the situation and ends up being kidnapped, then the hero comes and rescues her? It’s what one expects from a romance story.”

“Certainly, as long as *you’re* not the heroine, that’s exactly how it would play out. Although a more typical heroine wouldn’t even climb out the window. How do you intend to resolve that?”

“Hmm, good question.” I paused a moment. “What if there’s a fire? If staying in the powder room means burning to death, surely even the most ladylike of ladies would go through the window.”

As I spoke, this new concept started to come together in my mind. I’d had enough of stories that were about romance and nothing else. I decided the next one would involve a rip-roaring series of catastrophes, full of drama and suspense. And amidst all of that, the fires of love would burn forth! I wasn’t about to waste the new information I’d gone to such efforts to obtain, but this would allow me to incorporate the basic concept while changing it just enough

that no one would suspect.

“Speaking of which, does Lord Simeon know yet? Have you told him about your work?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. I’m still mulling over what to do, but I definitely haven’t reached the point that I can tell him yet.”

“That’s understandable. It is commonly accepted that ‘author of popular fiction’ is not an appropriate occupation for a young lady from a good family.”

That’s my secret: I work as a novelist. I write romance stories that are widely read by upper-class and middle-class women.

It lets me combine pleasure and profit, so it makes my life very satisfying. No matter how plain I may be in real life, in the world of my books I can enjoy giddy romance and thrilling adventures. As long as I have something to feed my fangirl urges, it’s enough to keep me going. That’s why I didn’t mind at all if my marriage was only for my family’s advantage. As long as my husband wasn’t too terrible, I didn’t wish for much more.

And of course, my husband-to-be was far from terrible—he was Lord Simeon! Out of every story I’d read and every character in those stories, I’d never seen someone that so perfectly embodied my favorite type of man: the type who appears kind and gentle on the outside, but is malicious and scheming on the inside. I couldn’t believe how thoroughly I was able to indulge my fangirl urges in real life! I may not have wished for much, but what I’d been granted fulfilled even my wildest expectations!

It’s the type of good luck that occurs only once in a lifetime. I couldn’t risk letting it slip through my fingers, so I decided it was best to keep my writing activities a closely guarded secret.

In that respect, a marriage of convenience was, in fact, rather convenient. It’s easier to keep secrets from someone if they have no real interest in you as a person. I expected that even if I were to be scribbling away at home, my husband would be unlikely to notice, since he’d be at work most of the time. I could rely on my family and the publisher to keep my secret. I saw no reason to abandon it.

Julianne went home, after requesting that my next work please include the particular type of men she enjoys reading about. My readers generally prefer male-female pairings, so I can't write about those kinds of men too openly, but that doesn't mean I can't include a few oblique hints.

I decided I'd write lots of interactions between a pair of handsome young men—enough to make Julianne really happy! *Leave it to me, Julianne! I have two men close at hand who make the perfect templates!*

That said, if I gave one of them black hair and the other blond hair it would be obvious who I'd based them on, so I decided I'd turn the more masculine of the pair into a blond. *And then his more mild-mannered companion could have softer light brown color hair... Yes, and then on the inside he'd be anything but soft!* I chuckled to myself. *The perfect contrast! Just thinking about it makes me want to write it!*

I'd reached such a peak of fangirl excitement that I started putting some notes down on paper straight away, but alas, the butler came and announced that I had a visitor. It seemed that Lord Simeon had come to the house despite us having made no prior arrangement for him to visit. I hurriedly checked that my appearance was in order, and went to the drawing room.

"I beg your pardon for the intrusion." Lord Simeon looked as dashing as ever today. His white royal guard's uniform suited him very well indeed.

Ah, isn't it nice to see a man in uniform? It makes him seem stoic and imposing, and at least twenty percent more attractive! Seeing Lord Simeon in such a uniform made me feel ever so close to suffering an intense nosebleed!

"Not at all," I replied, offering him a seat. "Is it about the matter from a few days ago?" A frank question, but it was the only conclusion I could draw from him turning up in his uniform without warning.

"After a fashion," he said, a wry smile on his face. He sat down, and I took a seat opposite him. We carried on talking while sipping tea brought by the maid.

"At the time, you told me everything was so sudden that you had no idea who was there or what exactly had happened. And yet..."

"Yes, I must apologize to you. I know that if I'd realized who it was at the time,

the case would have been solved more quickly. Only everything at the scene was such a blur of disorder and chaos... It wasn't until I got home and was able to calm down that I finally realized who it was."

I'd jumped in directly with an apology, forestalling his inevitable line of questioning. You see, if we'd hidden the fact that I'd contributed my suspicion of who had been arguing in the dark, solving the case would have been nearly impossible, so my father and brother had to reveal that the information came from me. This would of course lead to questioning about why I'd hidden such crucial evidence in the moment, so I was well prepared for this.

The excuse I'd prepared was exactly as I'd just told Lord Simeon. It was all so sudden, it was a very dark night, immediately beforehand I'd been cruelly trapped in a room so I was already an emotional wreck, how could a terrified young lady ever hope to give accurate testimony, etc., etc.

The one thing I absolutely would not do was apologize for hiding the information from him. Any apology would, I'd decided, be for the trouble I'd caused him by not remembering whose voice it was at the scene itself.

Lord Simeon stopped his questioning and remained silent for a moment. I'd beaten him to the punch. I had no doubt that all kinds of thoughts were whirling through his mind as he elegantly drank his tea. I was shaking from all the tension in the air.

"We interviewed the perpetrators, but they knew absolutely nothing about the windows being broken. I don't suppose you have any idea who did it?"

I paused. "No, I haven't the slightest idea. I was certain it was one of those men, but...if not them, it's a mystery to me. Perhaps there was someone else there, other than me."

I had the sense that he was about to vigorously proclaim that he'd seen right through my lies, but I feigned the best expression of ignorance I could muster. It was clear that I'd have been better off telling the truth about this point from the start, but now that I'd committed to the deception, I had no choice but to follow through and maintain I was definitely not the one who had broken the windows.

How could I have known back then what I could and couldn't say? If the

knights hadn't found any signs of conflict, it would have looked like I was causing a fuss entirely of my own volition and breaking the windows for no reason! Just making a fuss would have looked better than making a fuss *and* causing serious property damage. I didn't want to be blamed for that, so I continued to insist that I had absolutely no knowledge of it.

My story was verified when those traces of blood were found, and then the perpetrators were arrested, so things had mostly reached a favorable conclusion. Still, one wrong move could have had me labeled a disgraceful problem child and caused me to suffer a humiliating downfall. I certainly hadn't been in a position to reveal everything right from the beginning.

Julianne and my family might have believed me even if there'd been no evidence, but I couldn't have expected anything like that from Lord Simeon. He definitely wouldn't have trusted me that far.

"We still don't know," he replied. "We're still investigating for now."

"I'm so sorry that I can't be of more help." I made myself as small as possible, as if to show how ashamed I was at being so thoroughly unhelpful. My voice and body language said: *I wish so dearly that I could show my fiancé how much I can help him, but I'm nothing but a useless girl. Oh, what will I do if he falls out of love with me!*

All an act, of course.

Not that my behavior came across as unnatural. It's how you'd expect a scene like this to play out. Lord Simeon stayed quiet for a moment, but whether it was because he accepted what I'd said or he'd simply given up...eventually he let out a soft sigh and didn't press the matter any further.

Instead, he changed the subject. "By the way, not that I'm expecting further calamity to befall you, but it might do to be careful for the time being. If you plan to attend any evening gatherings, or any other such functions, I'd appreciate it if you informed me about them. You do seem to have your fair share of other problems."

I tilted my head. *What other problems?*

"I've come to realize that it might not be safe to leave you alone in places like

that. Though you've been the target of plenty of malicious gossip, I felt that as long as you seemed unperturbed by it, there was no cause for concern. However, I can't stand idly by when you've been treated in such an abominable manner as you were the other night."

Oh, I thought, he's talking about my mistreatment at the hands of those girls. Which reminded me: hadn't he confirmed that I'd been locked in the powder room?

"Lord Simeon," I asked, "how was it that you found out about the door? Did someone inform you about it?"

"No, I discovered myself that it had been tied shut. I checked the powder room when I was searching for you."

Goodness, for him to have gone that far... How gratifying!

I paused, and tried to add an air of hesitancy to my words. "Lord Simeon... Do you think less of me? My thoroughly improper behavior, climbing out of the window like that..." I thought it best to ask the type of question a typical lady would feel was pertinent. Not that I expected he'd break off the engagement over something like this, but it seemed proper to ask, at least.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures, Marielle. I'd only be worried if you made a habit of it."

"I wouldn't dream of it!" *It's true, recently I've hardly done it at all...although until a few years ago I was regularly scolded by Mother for climbing out of windows.*

"Nor do I suspect you would," he replied with a kind smile. "I could never doubt your sense of modesty and decorum."

Though he spoke as if to reassure me, I felt a vague sense that I was being silently subjected to his questioning. *But it must be my imagination, surely? Just my guilty conscience playing on my mind? He doesn't know the first thing about me as a person. He can only possibly know me as the plain, meek girl I appear to be.*

Circumstances had forced me to behave in a way that was inappropriate for the daughter of a noble family, but I'd expressed all the required contrition. I

hoped he'd be satisfied with that.

In the end, he couldn't stay long, as he'd taken time out of his work day to visit me. He stood up with an apology for leaving so quickly. Then, in a tone that suggested he'd remembered the subject just as he was leaving, he asked, "Do you know the name Agnès Vivier?"

Do I know her? I thought. *Why, yes. I know her better than anyone else in the entire world.* "Yes," I said, playing up my hesitancy again. "Vivier... She's an author, I believe. I've heard of her, yes..."

"And have you read her books?"

"...Yes. I imagine you hate that sort of thing?" It wasn't uncommon for bullheaded men to be outraged by popular fiction. How dare anyone read such common filth? I wondered if Lord Simeon subscribed to a similar value system.

"Not at all. I've read a handful of her works and I found them quite entertaining."

"You've...read them? You, Lord Simeon?"

This left me truly shocked. I'd never have expected a man to have read my books—and to have enjoyed them, no less! I'd most definitely written them with women as the intended audience.

"My cousin gave them to me. She told me if I was getting engaged, I should read them to learn about the female heart."

"I see."

A satisfying enough explanation for why he knew about them, but it was still a surprise that he had actually read them.

"What I've learned is that women have a far stronger will than we men like to believe, but also that they have a certain purity about them. Vivier paints such a clear picture of human interactions... I've found plenty of points worth noting even outside of the romantic content. She writes about people so realistically, one could almost believe she spends her entire life observing their behavior."

"...I can see what you mean." *That feeling again. Like his smile is silently pressuring me. But it must surely be my imagination... Surely...*

“As I was reading, I occasionally had a strange sense of déjà vu, as if real people and places I’d experienced had been used as the basis for the story. I have to believe that Vivier takes inspiration from members of the royal court.”

“Perhaps,” I replied. “She is rumored to belong to a noble family, I hear. Do you suppose the rumor is true?”

I know nothing! But, you know, there’s a rumor, that part is true. I’m a fan, so of course I’ve heard the rumors!

“It’s entirely plausible. If so, we might expect that the events of the royal ball will make it into her work as well.”

“I suppose!” I said, doing my best to play this off with a lighthearted smile in the hope that he’d move on. How else could I act in this situation?

I don’t have any special knowledge, not at all! I’m just a common novel reader. I can’t wait for Vivier’s next book!

I met Lord Simeon’s smile with a fixed smile of my own and held out until the very moment that I could see him off. I didn’t let him see the slightest waver in my resolve.

Of course I don’t feel like I’m under investigation. Why would I? I’m just an ordinary fan! I have no connection to Vivier at all!

I went back to my room and just about collapsed. Keeping up appearances around Lord Simeon, not letting a single crack show in my armor, was incredibly tiring.

Had he figured it out, I wondered? And if so, how? What had given it away? I was sure there’d been no opportunity for him to learn about my secret work.

Perhaps I’m overthinking it. My own guilt is making me feel like I’m under suspicion.

Though it pained me to the point of tears, I had to throw out the plans I’d jotted down earlier. I couldn’t write a novel like that. If Lord Simeon were to read it, he’d have known immediately that it came from me. Even leaving aside the incident at the ball, he’d certainly have figured out who had inspired the two dashing handsome young men I’d planned to include for Julianne’s

benefit!

And they inflamed my fangirl urges so beautifully... How frustrating!

I wondered if I could rework it to make the connection less obvious. More urgently, I wondered if Lord Simeon's words were an attempt to discourage me from writing at all.

It seemed farfetched to take our conversation as an implicit criticism of my work as a writer...but I couldn't exclude the possibility.

I decided I had to find out more about Lord Simeon. So far I'd been relying only on my impressions of his outward behavior, and high society gossip. Perhaps I had to go beyond that and gather opinions from within the Royal Order of Knights. *I'm soon to be married to this man. I need an accurate picture of the type of man he really is.*

I pondered how best to collect the information I needed. I had to do it, or I'd never be able to pursue my hobby without attracting Lord Simeon's attention. I couldn't let the engagement fall through, but I had to protect my own interests at all costs.

I realized for the first time that my fiancé might be rather a nuisance.

And yet, at the same time, I was finding it harder and harder to suppress the fangirl flames that were flaring up inside me.

What a terrifying, treacherous man. Oh, Lord Simeon, my future husband, you are too wonderful for words. I'm fangirling over you so hard. Whatever happens, please don't let me down!

Chapter Three

If I had to describe my fiancée in a single word, it would be “strange.”

I made it back to her at last after somehow fending off the endless flow of people trying to engage me in conversation. “I must apologize for leaving you unattended.”

Though I’d left her sitting alone by the wall for rather a long time, she gave no indication that it had bothered her. Instead, she greeted me with a serene smile. She spoke a few words of gratitude and concern for me, while saying absolutely nothing about what had happened to her in the interim.

This despite the fact that quite a number of people had come over to talk to her. She’d been engaged in conversation until just before my return. Although I’d stood at quite a distance, I’d been occasionally glancing back at her.

Since accepting my proposal, Marielle had suddenly attracted a great deal of attention. She’d become the target of jealousy and slander to a degree that she would never have experienced before. I was quite sure that while I’d been preoccupied this evening, she’d again been harassed and insulted.

But she didn’t breathe a word of this. She awaited me with calm and composed features, as if all was well. In other circumstances I might have been a satisfied fiancé, entirely impressed with what a well-bred young lady she was. However...

“Marielle?”

She’d been gazing at me with a peculiar sparkle in her eyes. No matter how hard she worked to keep her facial expression constrained, her eyes still betrayed something I couldn’t quite name. Curiosity? Passion of some sort?

Plain and quiet as she seemed, some sort of wild idea was brewing in her mind. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know about it, but I couldn’t ignore the ominous feeling that hung in the air.

Or was it just affection toward her beloved fiancé—simply a young lady’s

romantic reverie?

It could be as sweet and innocent as that...couldn't it?

No, I decided. Absolutely not. It was nothing like that at all.

To a bystander it might have looked like that, but I was certain, without a shadow of a doubt, that this would be a mistaken impression.

“Yes?” She cocked her head in a charmingly ladylike manner and presented a look of feigned ignorance, as if she’d been thinking of nothing whatsoever. *She appears so harmless and ordinary, so lacking in any distinguishing features at all, but what kind of person is she really?*

She still didn’t realize what I knew about her.

The first time I’d ever seen her was a few years prior. A ball at the royal palace, just like this one. I’d escaped the hustle and bustle to somewhere less populated, and as I walked along to catch my breath, I heard some women’s voices.

I groaned internally. I’d been hoping to find a quiet spot on my own.

From the sound of their voices, I realized they were young ladies. If they’d noticed me it would have been quite a bother, so I started to walk away, when one of them said something that piqued my interest.

“Frankly, I find it utterly shameless that someone as disgraceful as you would even dare to enter the palace.”

Barbed words indeed, and dripping with haughty disrespect. Rather than an excited group of friends, I’d encountered some sort of argument. The thought of getting involved was exhausting, but I stopped in my tracks anyway.

The ladies of high society were all the same. Captivatingly beautiful from their looks alone, but beneath the surface, so ready to antagonize and abuse that they’d try anyone’s patience. In all honesty, I wanted nothing to do with them, but in my role as a knight of the royal guard, I couldn’t ignore a quarrel happening right next to me. *If it stays in the realm of words there’ll be no harm in leaving well enough alone*, I thought, *but I should at least make certain that no one is likely to be injured.*

I stood and watched from the shadow of a large pillar. Five or six girls had gathered in the small courtyard. One was surrounded by the others. I couldn't tell who she was with all the dresses in the way, but I could just barely see that her dress was a pale violet.

But looking at the faces of the ones surrounding her, I had a flash of recognition. They were all hangers-on of House Cavaignac. And amongst the crowd of well-dressed figures, one stood out as the most dazzling of all: Miss Aurelia, the daughter of Marquess Cavaignac.

In a glimmering violet dress.

Apparently they were both wearing the same color dress, and this had caused some consternation. That's what I was able to glean from the words being thrown about. For daring to wear a dress the same color as Miss Aurelia's, they all seemed to view the other young lady as a brazen, impudent girl who didn't know her place.

All a bunch of nonsense. Why do women care about such trivial things? What difference does it make what color a dress is? And when there are hundreds of people in one place, how could it ever be possible for everyone to be wearing different colors?

It seemed so obvious to me—of *course* you'd encounter someone with the same color dress!—that I couldn't understand why anyone would find such a thing so unforgivable.

A profoundly tiresome situation. But it didn't look like their accusations would be followed by any physical aggression, so I stayed where I was and kept watch.

Miss Aurelia and her cronies let every insult fly that they could think of, then finally sauntered away, their voices ringing with disdain and unbridled laughter.

The courtyard was left empty apart from one young lady.

She'd cast her eyes down, and her straight, brown hair hid her face. I assumed she was crying, or shaking in fear. Who wouldn't be after they were ganged up on and berated like that?

Their dresses may have been the same color, but it was clear that this one was not nearly as fine as Miss Aurelia's. She couldn't have belonged to an

especially high-ranking house. *She did her best to dress up for the ball, and then she was scornfully mocked for it, accused of imitating the style of her betters. She must be devastated.*

As silly and trifling as I found the cause of her misery, I still felt sorry for her. A young lady was crying after being bullied—I'm not completely heartless, you know. I dithered over whether to go and console her or not.

The issue was that if I wasn't careful, she might get attached to me, which I feared would lead to bigger problems. My general policy was to avoid starting any conversations with young ladies unless they spoke to me first. *And if she gets too close to me, I thought, it could make her a further target for Miss Aurelia's scrutiny, so keeping my distance might be better for her as well.*

And yet, I also couldn't bear the thought of just leaving her there alone. It seemed awfully sad.

As I stood there debating what to do, I heard a voice. The young lady in the courtyard let out the quietest of utterances.

Oh, goodness. She's unable to contain her sobbing. I abandoned my hesitation and started towards her, deciding I'd find a way to console her that wouldn't seem too forward.

Then I heard the sound again—more clearly this time.

"Hehe... Hehehe... Heh..."

I paused. *Excuse me?* It was a very odd noise for a crying person to make. It sounded less like sobbing and more like...laughter.

"Heh... Hehehehe...!"

She was still looking at the ground and her shoulders were still shaking a little, but what I heard was most definitely laughter.

A feeling of unease grew inside me. I chose not to step any closer. *Has she been driven senseless? Could someone be so weak-willed that bullying of that sort leaves them totally devoid of reason?*

I continued to hesitate, albeit for a slightly different reason than before. But my thoughts were interrupted by another voice.

“Marielle!”

A black-haired young lady ran over, so young that she was little more than a child. I didn't recognize her; she'd likely made her debut into society only recently. She ran straight towards the young lady in the courtyard, who finally lifted her head. She was very young as well. She wore a large pair of glasses, and beneath them, her face appeared to be flushed bright red with joy.

“It was incredible, Julianne! The very picture of being picked on by a group! The quintessential bullying young ladies! It was such a thrill, getting an authentic experience like that! I got chills!”

...Now hold on a moment.

“Now I really know what it feels like to be surrounded! It's like a suffocating wall of dresses. Lady Aurelia plays the role so well, I could almost fall in love with her.”

The black-haired girl, Julianne, looked stunned. All she could do was shrug. “Not that I really thought I needed to worry about you, but...”

I was equally stunned. *Why is she smiling? How can she be so cheerful after she was mocked and insulted so relentlessly?*

“Oh,” said the young lady, “I'd better write it all down before I forget. They used so many fantastic insults, I want to be sure I can borrow each and every one of them. I'd never have known so many different ways of expressing the same thing! I was very impressed. I suppose if you're so well educated, it gives you a wide vocabulary. I have to portray them as accurately as possible.”

Then the young lady—whose name, I'd gathered, was Marielle—took a pair of small items out of her handbag. *A notebook, and...a pen?*

“They've given me so much material, I hardly need to invent anything at all. I could almost write a dictionary of insults. I hope they'll come and harass me again at some point. I'd love to spend more time with them. They seem like a treasure trove of potential reference material.”

“I wonder if they'd bother. From Lady Aurelia's point of view, people like us aren't even worthy of notice.”

“I see what you mean. I drew her attention tonight because we happened to be wearing the same color, but I won’t be so fortunate every time.”

Fortunate? In what world could that bullying incident be called “fortunate”!?

Miss Marielle continued, “For the bullying young ladies to have a long-term grudge against me, there’d need to be something about me that justifies that. The protagonist of the story always has some reason for being bullied. She’s really beautiful, or she has a special talent that everyone’s jealous of...the kind of quality that only a heroine has. That could never be me, though. Maybe I could find someone else who fits the description and do some close-up reconnaissance? That would be perfect.”

She diligently moved her pen across the paper as she spoke. Julianne, clearly used to this, just sat across from her and watched.

If nothing else, I understood that there’d been no need for any concern on my part. Beyond that, I was at a loss. I’ll confess that standing in the shadows and listening in on a private conversation between two young ladies was not the most admirable of behavior, but I was so intrigued by Miss Marielle’s eccentric nature that I could hardly help myself.

“The tragic heroine faces an onslaught of bullying, but then she meets a wonderful man and has a happy ending and shows everyone. I think the readers like that kind of thing. But for the climax to really make an impact, the story leading up to it is just as important, you know? If the way I describe the bullying feels too cheap and flimsy, they’ll see right through it. It’s just so tough to draw the reader into the world of high society! It’s not enough to have good heroes—you’ve got to have good villains, too.”

Readers... Story... Villains... It’s starting to come together.

As I listened to Miss Marielle’s animated explanation, I was finally able to grasp roughly what she meant. She was talking about novels.

Is she an author? Is she glad to have been bullied by Miss Aurelia and her friends because she can use the experience as reference material?

If so, I thought, that made a certain kind of sense. Her reaction had been so out of the ordinary that I’d feared she had some sort of mental affliction, so it

was a relief to know there was a reason behind it.

And yet I still found it hard to accept. Surely no normal girl would go through something like that and treat it as nothing but reference material for a novel?

How could she be followed to a secluded place and attacked by a mob, then afterward be filled with glee at how helpful it was for her writing? How could she take the hateful words of abuse that had been targeted at her and gratefully write them down in her notebook? It was the furthest thing from normal!

Who is this person? I thought. *What makes her tick?* Even after that night, I found it hard to forget about this girl who'd probably only just made her debut into society, whose manner still marked her out as a child, and whose behavior was so very inscrutable.

I caught sight of her at countless balls and garden parties. She seemed to enjoy spending time anywhere that people had gathered in large numbers.

My line of work had made me experienced at recognizing people's faces and other characteristics, and her glasses should have also marked her out, but in truth, it was often difficult to spot her in a crowd. She was no great beauty, but neither was she ugly, certainly not in any sense that stood out. She had brown hair and was of average height and build: the epitome of the word "average."

She was the type of person that you might think you've seen somewhere, but then they disappear into a crowd and you lose them again. In trying to find something I could compare her to, the closest was an animal that blends into its natural surroundings by way of camouflage. An insect that perfectly imitates a leaf, or perhaps a lizard that changes the color of its entire body. Spotting Miss Marielle in a crowd was like playing in a forest and finding all the wildlife that lives there in secret.

If I did notice her, I felt such a sense of accomplishment. I wanted to cry, "There she is!" Just like chasing insects in the forest when I was a young boy, before I knew it, looking for Miss Marielle became a force of habit.

And whenever I found her, she continued to be strange.

Even though she made an active effort to attend every gathering she could,

she hardly talked to anyone and was usually on her own. I thought perhaps she had a timid personality that made it hard for her to start conversations, but a person like that would normally be hoping for someone to notice them. They tended to attach themselves to larger groups, or loiter in conspicuous places looking expectant. Young ladies like that often appeared in my general vicinity, so it was easy to tell the difference. Miss Marielle did not want to be seen. I had no doubt about that.

Which in turn made it clear that she was purposely acting in a way that she knew would draw as little attention as possible.

It wasn't just her natural appearance. She also dressed in a way that always fit the situation, but never drew the eye. Most girls would be as creative as they could to try and stand out from the pack, to look just a little more beautiful than the other ladies, but Miss Marielle did the opposite. She wore modest clothes, but never so plain that they had the opposite effect. Perfectly ordinary clothes, neither good nor bad, every single time. It had to have been a conscious choice, and maintaining that level of invisibility had to have taken a great deal of effort.

But why do it at all? Well, that was something else that became clearer through observation.

She didn't talk to people directly, but she did listen to other people's conversations. She would nonchalantly draw near to anyone having a spirited discussion, blend in with the scenery, and focus all her attention on them. Young or old, male or female, she didn't care. She hid in plain sight and took in every conversation she could.

It was impressive that no one ever noticed her, but these were, after all, places where vast swathes of people gathered. If a young lady stood nearby with no distinguishing characteristics to mark her out, most people would treat her as part of the scenery. In fact, if I hadn't witnessed the events of that night, I'm not confident I'd have ever noticed her either.

And, after she collected a new conversation, she would find a hidden corner to write in her notebook. Whenever I saw her writing, she had the most joyful look on her face. *She must have found some good material today*, I always

thought. *I wonder what kind of novel she's writing?* I would watch in stunned silence, and it slowly played on my mind more and more.

When young ladies made their debut into high society, it was with the primary goal of winning a husband. They were eager to promote themselves and find someone who would improve their circumstances, even if only slightly. Miss Marielle, on the other hand, had made it her utmost priority to attract no attention whatsoever, and was devoted to collecting reference material for a novel. I longed to challenge her directly: *Why did you come here?*

That was how it came to be that I spent several years of my life, alongside my normal work and societal duties, observing a very odd young girl.

"Simeon, aren't you ever going to get married?" Prince Severin asked one day, devoid of any context, while I was accompanying him on an inspection.

I raised my eyebrows. "I might just as well ask the same of you."

"I'm weighing my options," he replied. "I don't recall taking a vow of celibacy."

I sighed. This was hardly the time for such nonsense. *He does realize we're surrounded by my subordinates?* "I've never suggested that I intend on a life of celibacy either."

"Then why aren't you married? You don't seem to even be trying to find a suitable match. You're almost thirty, Simeon. If you don't start to have some involvement with women, people will get the wrong idea."

"You needn't worry, Your Highness. If people do start having suspicions about me, I'm certain they'll deem you to be the other party involved."

"That's precisely why I am worried! You must get married—for my sake, if nothing else!"

I wondered if someone had said something to him already.

His sense of humor disappeared and he poked me with a finger. "Your mother's worried, too! Nobody wants their son and heir to be single forever. I don't mind finding you a partner, if it helps. Start having some formal introductions. Just do it posthaste!"

“Formal introductions... Hmm, I suppose.”

His Highness’s concerns aside, it’s not that I hadn’t thought about marriage at all.

My parents, and my mother in particular, had been badgering me about it quite incessantly. Though the clock wasn’t ticking as quickly for me as it did for young women, it still left them uneasy that their son was unmarried at twenty-seven. I began to think I had better start considering this more seriously.

I’d be lying if I said I had no interest in getting married, or no interest in women at all. I’d merely made work my highest priority and put it off until later. Besides, no partner had ever emerged that I’d actually want to choose.

But the thought of starting to meet potential candidates was still very unappealing. Truth be told, I was a little afraid of the type of young lady that might be presented to me. Would they all be creatures like Miss Aurelia, perfect on the surface but with decidedly imperfect depths? I could prioritize personality over looks, but then, women are so skilled at hiding their true nature. There was every chance they might present themselves as being of sound character, then turn out to be rotten and spiteful to their core.

I didn’t wish for much. I just wanted someone that I could spend time with comfortably as a person.

I told His Highness so, and his face grew clouded. He’d been struggling to find a suitable princess himself, so he shared my frustration. If he found an ideal partner like that, he’d no doubt court her himself, rather than introducing her to me.

It was rather complicated.

While I was still mulling over all this, I had a chance to speak to Miss Marielle’s father, Viscount Clarac. He asked if I could introduce him to any suitable candidates for his daughter’s hand.

“Perhaps there’s someone amongst your subordinates who would be suitable. My daughter turned eighteen this year... She’s not a beauty even by the most generous description, but she has a decent head on her shoulders. She conducts herself in a bright and perceptive manner, and will accomplish any

duty that is ever asked of her. I've raised her very well in that regard, so I can offer up my daughter with every confidence."

The Viscount sighed, then continued, "If only she weren't so quiet and unassuming, she might be noticed by the gentlemen in society. Perhaps she might not seem like enough to all the esteemed royal guards, but she'd make a perfectly good wife. A wife is not the same as a lover, you see. If you're to leave your home in someone's care, they need to be virtuous and reliable. In that respect, my daughter would be a fine bargain. All of which is to say, perhaps you'd be kind enough to put a good word in, if there's anyone you'd have in mind."

The viscount made his case very effectively, and in a very respectable-sounding manner. He acknowledged all that Miss Marielle was lacking in terms of beauty and splendor, while emphasizing the qualities she did possess that would make her an excellent wife. An approach that looked innocent—he certainly delivered it as such—but that was, in fact, a cunning strategy worthy of a man like the viscount, who had worked hard and climbed the ladder well. I'm sure there were plenty of men who would hear a sales pitch like this and immediately jump on board.

But of course, it wasn't entirely honest. It presented one facet of Miss Marielle, but left out something quite crucial. Her unparalleled eccentricity couldn't be brushed aside; it was very relevant to potential suitors.

I understood that he was trying to present her in the best light. If he laid the facts bare, Miss Marielle would be passed up—there'd be no arrangement. Still, I was hesitant to pass on the viscount's words directly to my men, knowing what I knew about Miss Marielle herself. *If her fiancé calls off the engagement after discovering the truth, even Miss Marielle might find it upsetting. Gossip would spread like wildfire and she'd have trouble finding another suitor, which has been difficult enough in the first place. It would be the ultimate stain on her reputation.*

But perhaps, I considered after a moment, even that would leave her thrilled to bits at all the material it gives her. I could believe that of her.

I imagined the sight of Miss Marielle hunched over her notebook, beaming

with joy, and I sighed. *Someone will have to introduce her to a suitable partner. She certainly won't find one on her own.*

I wished there was someone who knew about her hobby and accepted it. And, in the very same moment, I realized that there was.

Well, why not? It would avoid all the bother of telling my men about her.

I already knew about her secret hobby. I already knew that she had a slightly odd personality. It didn't bother me—in fact, I'd always enjoyed my time spent observing her.

Miss Marielle was an eccentric individual, but she certainly wasn't ill-natured. Despite her great enthusiasm for collecting gossip, she never spread any gossip herself. She acted purely for the sake of her novel writing, and the reference material she needed for it. I'd never seen her express any interest in gossip for its own sake. In the world of high society, where every little rumor grew into a spectacular scandal, you could say that someone like Miss Marielle was hard to come by.

The principles that govern her are based entirely around her writing. That wouldn't normally be praised as virtuous, but...that doesn't inherently mean it's bad, does it?

Besides, I thought, I've been looking for a marriage partner myself lately.

I told the viscount that she sounded perfect, and that I'd like to put my own name forward. He was shocked, to say the least.

"Oh," he said, momentarily lost for words. "You honor me by even suggesting such a thing, but don't you feel it would be rather an uneven match? My own house is not nearly equal in status to House Flaubert, and I'm certain that there are countless young ladies who can present more favorable conditions for someone of your caliber, Lord Simeon. There's also a slight difference in your ages..."

Rather than jumping at the offer, he expressed his concerns. I got a sense of the true nature that lay beneath his carefree exterior. A carrot had been dangled before him, but he knew better than to bite straight into it. He was cautious of a trap.

He was right to be wary. If she was matched with a man whose family was on equal footing to House Clarac, it wouldn't matter so much if her true character was discovered. They'd still be able to smooth it over and push ahead with the marriage. "She has a slightly unusual hobby, that's all," or some such nonsense.

That wouldn't be possible with me. There's a fundamental power imbalance between us, so if I made any complaints, they'd have no recourse. The viscount had likely judged that even if he leapt at this chance, it could eventually lead to heavy consequences for his house, so it would be better to avoid the risk.

He might even think that I've sensed a problem already and only made this offer to try and fish it out. He's a sly one.

"You do have a point," I replied. "To an eighteen-year-old, I must seem like an old man."

"No, no, no, I'm suggesting nothing of the sort! No young lady could ever think that of you, Lord Simeon. Besides, nine years isn't such a great difference. It's fairly common, in fact."

"Indeed, my own parents are eight years apart, which is why I felt it was still appropriate to ask for your daughter's hand. Do you feel otherwise, Viscount Emile?"

"No, I wouldn't say that," he replied, with a calm smile that I was certain hid a frantic inner debate. I just smiled back, betraying none of my suspicions.

Even prudent people can sometimes cause themselves unnecessary turmoil by thinking too much. I'm the type to do that as well, so I couldn't judge the viscount for it. I understood his concern, needless though it was.

I decided to continue the conversation, still revealing nothing. I was intrigued to see how he would respond to my insistence.

"For my house, this would indeed be a joyous turn of events. More than we deserve, truly... But I do wonder how your parents would take the news. Would you not face some disapproval for marrying so far below your station?"

"Come now, there's no need for such self-abasement. House Clarac has a long and proud lineage in its own way. You've faithfully served generation after generation of kings, which has lent you a degree of recognition, even if you

haven't always stood out from the other noble houses. You and your son are also well recognized for your skill in carrying out your duties."

"Well," said the viscount with an awkward chuckle, "it's most flattering to hear you say such things..."

"My house is an earldom and yours is a viscountcy. I don't feel there's too great a disparity at all."

A nervous breath. "Perhaps you're right..."

Heh, he seems about ready to break into a cold sweat. Impressive that his face is still a perfect mask.

"But," he continued, "my daughter is—how shall I put this—a very plain girl. I fear she's lacking in many of the qualities required to show herself in public as a member of such a high-ranking house."

"Didn't you say yourself that she'd do an excellent job of taking care of a home? I've been looking for exactly that kind of woman. I'd be disappointed with a wife who was so focused on the latest trends and gossip that she was never at home. There'd be no need for any more socializing than she felt comfortable with. I'm not looking for a glamorous wife. All I want is one who will give me a happy and stable home."

"Some would call that an old-fashioned mindset," said the viscount, arching his eyebrows.

"It might sound conceited, but I am no stranger to women's attention. The ones who have nothing to offer but their looks stopped impressing me long ago. I'm looking for a marriage partner, someone to spend my entire life with. Naturally my focus is on what's inside, not what lies on the surface. I need to marry someone calm and reliable."

His face screwed up in thought. "Hmm..."

Perhaps my words had finally moved him. *There have been cases where the husband was a shameless debaucher, but the wife was plain and down to earth. The gentleman needed to know plenty of women before he learned what type of woman truly had value. Why couldn't this be one of those cases?*

As if thinking the same thing, he let his upbeat facade drop and asked, "You really don't mind that her appearance is the very definition of plain?"

"Not one bit."

"She's quiet, and that's all she is. There's nothing interesting about her at all."

No, I thought, laughing inside, *she's very interesting. She might be the most interesting person alive.* "Even quiet people have their own sort of appeal, surely."

"There is one more thing. Ever since she was a child, she's been a voracious reader, and it's given her something of a fanciful quality. At times, she seems a little divorced from reality."

He certainly had a way with words. "*Something of a fanciful quality*"? *That's putting it lightly.* I had severe doubts as to whether Miss Marielle's behavior could be accurately described by such a dainty little phrase.

"Are you saying that she can be overly sensitive?"

"You...could describe her as such," he replied, his voice full of hesitation.

There's no use lying, I thought. I could tell he was trying to find a delicate way to say that his daughter spent her life studying the people around her and using them as inspiration for her writing.

Instead he just sighed, as if admitting defeat. "Then perhaps it's best if you meet her in person. Unless you talk to someone directly, there will always be aspects of their character that don't come across. Then, if you find that she's not to your satisfaction, you can feel quite free to say so. You needn't be shy."

And so, having finally given his consent, Miss Marielle's father arranged for us to be introduced to one another. He must have thought that I'd change my mind the moment I saw her. *Which I certainly won't*, I thought.

I visited the Clarac family at their home and conversed with Miss Marielle for the first time. It was there that I formally proposed to her.

Just as I'd expected, Marielle had a spirited disposition with not a hint of malice. She acted with restraint, never imposing herself on me, but when I spoke to her, she replied in a surprisingly sensible manner. She was clever, just

as her father had said. Reading so many books, and writing her own, had given her a knack for getting straight to the point. And yet, I felt none of the irritation one sometimes has when talking to an intellectual. I was satisfied that I'd found an excellent partner.

My mother presented a slightly different opinion.

"Simeon, are you sure you want to marry her?" she asked, after the meeting between her family and mine. She wore a very conflicted expression, a mixture of dissatisfaction and doubt.

"Quite sure, which is why I proposed to her. Do you not approve of her, Mother?"

"I wouldn't say I don't approve." Her face grew even more troubled. "I'm glad that you've found someone so proper and composed. She seems well educated, and there are no particular problems with her."

No particular problems. *Only that she's very, very plain. The type of person who melts into her surroundings, leaving so little trace that you'd forget she's even there.*

I could comprehend my mother's wariness of such a creature of camouflage, whose presence was so slight that it was hard to even judge her. I'm sure she'd have been more comfortable with a simpler person, beautiful and charming and easy to read.

Marielle hid all her eccentricities perfectly and played the part of the most nondescript young lady one could imagine. She presented no gaps in her armor, even to me. You could describe it with a complimentary word like "modesty" or "virtue," if you chose to, but it was as if there was an empty space where Marielle stood.

It must be very tough to form an opinion, I thought, knowing nothing about her true nature. I'd also found it a challenge to find aspects of her that I could praise. All I could manage was perfunctory praise that could apply to anyone. This was by design on her part. She wanted nothing about her to draw any attention, so I found nothing.

She was no doubt being especially cautious of her true nature being

discovered at an early stage, where I might call off the engagement straight away. I wondered what face she would make when she realized none of this effort was needed. *It's sure to be interesting! I'll have to wait until I find the most effective moment to tell her.* For now, I played along, as if she'd fooled me completely.

As I pictured her look of surprise, a smile began to form. At the same time, I felt conflicted. *As long as she can't be honest with me, she'll never let her guard down. We may be engaged, but for the time being, our relationship is a formality, nothing more.*

That thought was somehow very disappointing.

"Vice Captain, your fiancée has arrived," said one of my men, who'd come to the riding ground to deliver the message. Marielle had come at exactly the time we'd agreed upon. I left my horse in the stablehand's charge and went to meet her at the entrance.

Marielle, who so far had never come to me with anything resembling a selfish wish or pleading request, had surprised me a few days earlier by asking me for a favor. "Is there any way it might be possible for me to visit the Royal Order of Knights? Only if it wouldn't be too much trouble." At first I thought it was an odd thing to ask, but I knew it must be related to her writing. Unless they had relatives in the Order, the knights' world was something women never got a glimpse of. She wanted to be a pioneer, venturing into unknown territory.

I didn't learn this until after my proposal, but her novel writing was not only a hobby, but a job. She had dedicated herself to it fully as her profession. In fact, she'd had several books released officially by a publishing company.

When I read some of her novels that my cousin pushed into my hands, I found the stories were strewn with familiar details. They were love stories set in the royal court, and the ways they played out—not to mention some of the smaller goings-on that were included—made their sources of inspiration obvious to anyone who had knowledge of the original events. This had led to the widespread rumor that the author might be a young noblewoman. The name "Agnès Vivier" was certainly a *nom de plume*. Her true identity was a topic of

much speculation for her readers.

But I know the truth. It's her—it has to be.

The dress incident had given it away. The villainous young lady, berating the protagonist for wearing the same color, couldn't have been anyone but Miss Aurelia. All the details matched that night, and she'd portrayed the whole scene so vividly.

Then I noticed something. *The next book's love interest is a royal guard? It's not related to our engagement, surely. She can't be using me as inspiration...can she?*

She could and was, of course.

"I don't mean to interfere with your work, so feel free to tell me if it's impossible. Only, I've heard there are occasions when those outside of the Order are permitted to enter the grounds. If they're delivering something to a relative, for example, or meeting with a superior officer. If there's any way that it can be permitted, I would very much like to visit you at work, Lord Simeon."

Anyone who didn't know better would have taken this as a charming request from a girl who wanted to know more about her fiancé. When she presented it to me, phrased as humbly as she could manage, I just nodded, unsure whether to be shocked or amused.

Well, what's the harm in her coming to take a look? Go ahead, make full use of it in your next book. Just don't make it obvious that you based it on me. Please.

Marielle waited outside the entrance, accompanied by a maid in true noblewoman fashion. I asked the man on duty why he hadn't let her through, but apparently she'd preferred to wait.

"Good day, Marielle."

At the sound of my voice, she turned to face me. Then her eyes widened as if in shock. She covered her mouth with her hands and stared at me as if she wanted to bite into me, devour me whole.

Is there something wrong with me? I took a glance down at my clothes. *No,*

everything seems in order...



She and her maid turned their backs to me and whispered amongst themselves.

“Another nosebleed, my lady!?” A whisper, but shrill and panicked.

“No,” Marielle replied, her voice a thin tremor. “I’m quite all right, thank you. I managed to contain it somehow. But...” She shuddered. “The sheer destructive force... It’s greater than I could have imagined!”

“He is rather easy on the eye, I must confess, my Lady.”

I ventured a trembling hand toward her shoulder. *Nosebleed? Is she all right?* “Marielle, is something the matter? Are you unwell?”

The second my hand made contact, she lifted her head, quick as a flash, and tried to smooth things over with a smile.

Huh. Now she’s a little too cheerful.

Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkled so brightly, they were almost blinding. “No, please don’t trouble yourself,” she replied. “The sun is just a little bright today, that’s all. It caught my eye a moment ago and left me a little dazed and disoriented.”

Well, she wasn’t wrong. It was a particularly sunny day. *Although the sun is definitely behind her.*

She continued to gaze at me with that peculiar intensity. She looked me up and down, slowly, carefully, as if she wanted to lick me from top to bottom. Then she breathed out, a sound of quiet admiration. If I had to put it into words, I’d have said that my fiancée was enchanted by me, spellbound even. But I felt something else, too. *Is that really all it is? There appears to be something else mixed in...*

“Let’s go inside, then. I can give you a tour of the training grounds later. First, we can sit and have tea.”

I handed my riding crop to a valet and beckoned Marielle to follow me.

Instantly her face changed to a look of *intense* disappointment.

What? Why!?

Now she was looking right through me. Her gaze was fixed on the valet. *The valet? Is he the one she was focused on all along?*

I took a proper look at him. He was a young lad, only just enlisted. A boy, really, an apprentice even younger than Marielle. *Surely there's nothing about him that would provoke such a response...*

Or was there? I suddenly noticed that her gaze was not fixed on his face, but on his hand.

Which held the riding crop I'd given him.

My head raced. *The riding crop. How is it related!?*

Driven by a sense that there was no use in asking, I began to lightly push Marielle toward the door. By this point, a number of men had stopped while passing through, full of curiosity. They'd all longed to know more about this mysterious fiancée of mine. Yet, when they saw her, you could read the undisguised puzzlement on their faces. It was like biting into some meat that you thought was beef, but turned out to be chicken. Not bad, but not quite right.

I wanted to tell them, *A woman's worth isn't only in her looks!* But even so, if they'd followed up by asking where Marielle's worth was, I'd have struggled to answer.

We went through to the drawing room and rested for a moment, exchanging a few more meaningless pleasantries.

Then in came my superior officer, apparently having heard us talking. "Ah, Simeon! So this is your lovely fiancée, is it? I hope you don't mind if I join you!"

I gave him some empty reassurances. He came in without even waiting and was right next to me by the time I'd finished talking. He couldn't even pretend to hide his curiosity.

At the sight of the middle-aged gentleman, Marielle stood and curtsied, betraying no surprise.

"Marielle Clarac. It's a pleasure to meet you. I must apologize for my terribly audacious request to come and visit my fiancé here. I just felt it would be such a

privilege to see how the Order is run, and to see the knights at work.”

“Don’t worry, you’re quite welcome here. Captain Albert Poisson, at your service. Truly, the honor is all mine. In a squalid place like this, a charming young lady is a sight for sore eyes!”

The Captain, whose fondness for all women was no secret, confidently lavished flattery even on a very plain one like Marielle. It reflected well on him that he didn’t judge women by their looks and reject the less pretty ones out of hand, but it did make him rather an indiscriminate flirt. If his leadership skills were as flawed as his character, I’m sure he’d have been forced out of his position long ago.

It wasn’t uncommon for the knights to receive visits from friends or family, but they never drew as much mindless curiosity as my fiancée. It was growing quite annoying. More of them stood just outside the door, peeking in through the cracks like ghouls. *Don’t they have anything more pressing to be getting on with? I’ll have to rearrange their duty rosters. Make sure they don’t have too much downtime.*

“It’s caused a minor commotion,” the Captain continued, “hearing that our Simeon here has got engaged. You’ll have to forgive our excess curiosity. I realize it must be quite a nuisance.”

“Oh, not at all. I’m finding the sense of camaraderie here to be quite agreeable. Envious, even. As a woman, all my time is spent at home. Seeing the way you all work together here, like a brotherhood, almost makes me wish I could live a similar life.”

The Captain laughed a big, bellowing laugh. “Well, I suppose it has its high points, but mostly it’s just a filthy pigsty. Even your fiancé... He puts on a polite face, but when it’s just us men, he can be rather brutal. His subordinates are always grumbling about him.”

Marielle giggled. “You seem quite easygoing by comparison. The two of you strike a fine balance, wouldn’t you say?”

“He does make up for my deficiencies! I’m glad to have him.”

Easygoing? I thought, incredulous. *He’d like you to think he is, certainly! But*

how could a cheerful and soft-hearted fellow ever end up leading an order of knights!?

I might have been the militaristic one in the public's eyes, but the Captain could also be quite venomous when he needed to. The very fact that he used me as cover should give a hint at his true viciousness. Curiosity was his stated reason for joining us, but I'm sure he wanted to scrutinize Marielle as well.

I knew that, but I didn't interfere. *It's Marielle. I doubt I need to worry about her.*

In fact, I was a little surprised at just how well they were getting along. Their discussion had become quite animated. I think they were each trying to piece together how the other saw me. I knew why the Captain would be concerned about that, but what information was Marielle looking for?

The men peeking in finally lost all patience and barreled into the room. At once, the room hardly had space left to breathe. They all started to ask Marielle questions about herself, but the conversation gradually shifted toward me as the main topic. *I suppose they've all decided there's nothing specific about Marielle that's worth knowing, so they've lost interest in her.*

But I soon realized there was more to it. Even while giving humble and innocuous replies to all their questions, Marielle was subtly leading the conversation. With careful skill, she piqued their interest in discussing me rather than her. She dressed up her questions as the kind that a normal fiancée would be worried about—how do I spend my time when I'm working, how am I seen by the people around me—and steadily collected all the material she needed.

Marielle would make a rather good secret operative. It was not the first time I'd had that thought. She could use every trick to discourage interest in herself and ferret out the information she wanted to hear. *If she was a man, I probably wouldn't like her that much,* I considered. But then I realized: *Wouldn't she actually be quite a lot like her brother?*

It wasn't just her father, it seemed. The whole family had more to them than met the eye.

Marielle was beset by raucous crowds until the very moment she went home,

but her spirits weren't dampened at all. She left with a look of pure satisfaction—definitely not the look of a girl who'd been continually interrupted while trying to spend time with her fiancé.

She looks so self-satisfied, like she had a goal and she fully achieved it. I suppose it really is true. The only reason she wanted to meet me was to get inspiration for her writing.

I knew this already, but it still astounded me that she thought of absolutely nothing except her novels.

After giving the men who'd shirked their duties to engage in idle chatter enough work to ensure they'd be busy until long into the evening, I returned to my office. For reasons unknown, the Captain followed me.

"She's very much your type," he said.

I returned his quip with a cold glare. "I'm glad to hear you say that, Captain."

"She's clearly not the ordinary young woman she appears to be. She's intelligent, and very shrewd. Doesn't miss a thing, if you ask me. If I really thought she was a devious woman trying to use you, I'd be urging caution, but..." He paused. "That's not quite the case, either."

He sat down with a *thud* and cocked his head. "It looked as if she just wanted to know more about you. Exactly how a fiancée should be, nothing wrong with it at all... Except that I had the feeling there was more to it than just being in love with you. There was some other, greater reason."

Very astute of the Captain. No surprise that he read Marielle perfectly even through her polite conversation. He had yet to arrive at the true source of her thoughts and actions, however. This was to be expected. *For anyone to figure it out on their own, they'd have to be very much the same type of person as Marielle herself.*

I knew the truth before I proposed to her, and I didn't particularly see it as a problem. I'm not the type of person who would look down on popular fiction, lumping it all together as vulgar dross. Marielle's books had engaging themes. They could move the reader's heart. I hadn't read only the ones my cousin forced upon me—I'd read every single one published to date. Reading them

gave a vivid sense of how much the author had enjoyed writing them, and even after I was finished, each one left an imprint on my soul.

Marielle liked observing people, and she liked depicting them too. In other words, she liked humanity as a species. That was a true virtue of hers, I thought, and worthy of credit.

And yet, I still sensed something not quite right lately. *Does she sense some dissatisfaction from my side?* I wondered.

I hoped not. As long as she performed her role as my wife in a proper manner, I was happy to approve of her having a slightly unusual interest on the side.

“Do you already have an idea of what that reason might be?” asked the Captain.

I nodded. “It’s something entirely personal to her. I assure you, it’s nothing to worry about.”

“And yet you seem worried.”

The bluntness of this statement left me silent for a moment. “Do I?” I said at last.

“Have you spoken to her? Properly, I mean. Not just the formalities. You should make the effort to push past all the false smiles and little deceptions and truly understand each other. You’re going to become family, spend your entire lives together. It’s much better if you can confront this head-on. Imagine being married, but having a relationship built on lies, never showing your true faces... It’s too tragic for words. It could almost make a grown man cry.”

The Captain looked me in the eye. “Just because you’re not marrying for love—it doesn’t mean you need to be cold and distant to each other on purpose. You must get to know her. Be friends, at least.”

I was speechless. I’d tried to hide all this, but the Captain had seen right through me.

I thought I’d been doing my best to be friendly with Marielle, but as the Captain said, there was nothing there but formalities. How could we truly know that things were comfortable between us if we were keeping so many secrets?

We'd hidden the very core of ourselves from each other. If someone told me I was just arranging things so that it appeared I had a happy engagement, I couldn't have denied it.

Should I tell her that I know? That I've known all along, since before we ever spoke?

If I did that, I wondered if she would open up to me as well.

But when we spoke the other day, she picked up on my implications and started trying to make sure of what I meant. That chat of ours must have put her on her guard. If I broach the subject now, too suddenly, it would only make things worse between us.

I was utterly lost as to what I should do.

I kept it all to myself and went about my royal guard duties as usual. Soon came a night where I accompanied Prince Severin to a gathering at a duke's residence, acting as his official escort. There I was accosted by a young woman I'd rather have avoided.

"Alone this evening, I see. Your fiancée preferred to stay home?"

Miss Aurelia greeted me with a self-assured smile and a dress of deepest crimson. As usual, an entourage of other young ladies surrounded her. Under their fierce gaze, I felt like a trophy buck about to fall prey to a hunter.

Their glimmering eyes gave Marielle's a run for their money. Yes, I thought. *This is how I'm used to being stared at.* I'd been used to it for a long time.

Yet there was a quality to Marielle's gaze that set it apart. Her eyes had enough zeal and ardor to give anybody pause, even these girls, but the impression they gave was completely different. *But why?* I wondered, my head full of doubt. *What's the difference?*

"I'm here to escort His Highness," I replied. "Purely official business."

I was quite eager to get back to His Highness, in fact. I was there to guard him, so I couldn't be too far away for too long.

But if I leave straight away, Miss Aurelia will probably just follow me. Since I'd taken myself off the market, she'd set her sights exclusively on Prince Severin.

She was looking for every chance to get close to him, having never realized that he'd ruled her out long ago. I didn't want to bother His Highness, so I pondered how to get rid of her.

"Of course, of course," said Miss Aurelia. "I only forgot because you and your lovely fiancée have been inseparable lately. Naturally, His Highness is more important."

The ladies around her all giggled shrilly.

Sensing a deeper meaning to her words, I took a quick glance around the room.

Ah, I see.

There, off in the distance, stood Marielle.

I obviously hadn't asked her to join me since I was attending for work purposes, and as she hadn't said anything to me about it, I assumed she wouldn't come. *It is rather odd for an engaged couple to come to the same event, but entirely separately. Miss Aurelia must find it quite entertaining.*

I turned back to face the gaggle of girls. Hints of curiosity and scorn faded in and out beneath their otherwise composed expressions. No doubt they'd spoken to Marielle before me, and spouted all kinds of nonsense.

I wondered what Marielle thought of the situation. There was no need to worry, I was sure of that much. Miss Aurelia's bullying would have left her not only undaunted, but positively thrilled. *But did it really not vex her at all to attend the same function as me when I didn't invite her?*

I suddenly lost all patience, broke free from them as quickly as I could manage, and walked away. I didn't feel much need to politely smooth things over after she'd been so hostile to me. It felt far more important to talk to Marielle. Despite it all, I was a little worried.

I went straight to her. When she noticed me there, she blinked behind her glasses.

"Good evening, Lord Simeon."

The same polite smile as always, with not a whiff of anxiety or gloom.

However, the calm facade she presented was anything but reassuring. Quite the opposite, in fact. My earlier sense of unease changed to frustration.

Yet, even though I'd been thrown so far off balance, I had to keep my composure at all costs. I couldn't be visibly angry with her.

"I hadn't expected you to come. I must apologize—I should have told you earlier that I'd be escorting His Highness."

She gestured casually with one hand. "You needn't be worried on my account. I was already aware. I heard it from one of your men a few days ago. Naturally, your work comes first. Please, don't give it a second thought."

Hold on... When did she hear it? And from whom? Somehow, without me realizing, she'd gained the confidence of my subordinates.

"Hadn't you better return to His Highness's side? I'd hate for you to be reprimanded."

And she was eager to send me away, too. *Is she saying that it's difficult to collect any reference material if I'm too close by?*

"Come with me," I said. "Since you're in attendance, it would be rude not to say hello to him. You're my fiancée now, after all. It's important to fulfill that role."

"Of course, you're quite right." A pause. "Only, he seems to be rather busy right now. He's talking to quite a number of people. That's why I thought it might be better to speak to him later."

She hadn't said anything wrong. Knowing when to avoid intruding, and how to wait for the right moment, were admirable qualities. Indeed, what she'd said was entirely correct.

In my mind, I understood that. But it still made me irrationally angry.

"If you say that, you'll be waiting forever. His Highness will be surrounded by people all night. Come."

I had successfully badgered Marielle into following me over to His Highness. Her face let slip the barest hint of perplexity, but she otherwise stayed perfectly composed and raised no more objections. She greeted His Highness with

faultless politeness and then parted ways with me again.

Very blunt and to the point, I thought. *Nothing like Miss Aurelia, or any of her hangers-on. They'd do anything to be noticed, and jump at any chance to talk to someone like the crown prince.*

Did Marielle really have none of their enthusiasm to talk to him, I wondered? Not even half as much? It seemed odd, since she'd looked at the both of us before with those passionate eyes of hers.

But then I realized. *Her eyes are nothing like Miss Aurelia's.*

And I knew what the difference was.

Marielle's eyes didn't hold any affection or interest toward the opposite sex. The only fascination there was toward humanity as a species.

She hadn't fallen in love with me.

I should have known it from the start, but when the truth finally hit me, it left me strangely crestfallen.

What cause do I even have to be disappointed? I'd arranged the marriage with her father, without even talking to her first. Of course we wouldn't have a romantic relationship. I hadn't even wanted that.

All I'd wanted was someone I could be assured was an acceptable wife. I'd chosen Marielle because she seemed the most suited for the role.

And that was all...wasn't it?

"Don't look so down in the dumps," said His Highness with a scowl. "It's very tedious. If it bothers you that much, go and follow her."

I mentally chided myself for letting this show on my face. I needed to focus. "No, Your Highness. I won't abandon my duties to deal with a personal matter. Marielle wouldn't want that either."

"It's hardly better to have you here, infecting me with your sulking. I'm in charge, and I say go."

"I'm not sulking..."

"It's showing on your face, for once. You hadn't noticed? Or perhaps you'd

like to explain exactly what that look was, as your eyes followed her all the way across the room? Clearly she's weighing on your mind."

I was lost for words. *Was it that obvious?* That I'd failed so utterly at hiding my emotions came as another agonizing shock.

But I couldn't just run after my fiancée, even if His Highness had expressly allowed it. I still had a duty to guard him, and I couldn't abandon my post so lightly. Crowds of people surrounded the prince—masses, even. Any one of them could be a snake in the grass, blending in, hiding their ill intentions. Any of them could try to get too close to His Highness. The situation with Marielle was frustrating, but far from urgent. I could meet her again later.

His Highness let out an exasperated sigh. "If you bottle up all your feelings, Marielle won't know about them either. You could try being at least somewhat honest with her!"

"It's not my intention to bottle up my feelings," I said.

"Perhaps not. But Marielle is weighing on your mind, and you'd like to go after her. You can just admit that. There's no need to pretend."

"Weighing on my mind? Well, that's not exactly untrue, but it's no reason to go running after her. There's no reason to worry about it. I mean that, really I do."

"But you still can't stop thinking about her."

He's relentless. I sighed, defeated. We knew each other too well, and had since boyhood. It was no use trying to hide from him.

I decided to admit this feeling that I didn't truly understand myself.

"Very well," I confessed. "Marielle is weighing heavily on my mind. I don't know what's bothering me, exactly. As a fiancée, she's faultless. She never does anything to cause me the slightest inconvenience, and never complains or expresses any selfish demands. She never interrupts—she waits quietly until she's spoken to. Tonight, for example, she fully understands that we couldn't spend any time together because I'm here working, and it doesn't bother her one bit. She's the ideal fiancée.

“So this feeling of displeasure, of disappointment, doesn’t make sense to me. I’m asking myself what the reason is, and I’m coming up short. There must be something I don’t like about her, but I don’t know what it is.” I lightly massaged my temples.

With a world-weary expression, His Highness replied, “You really haven’t worked it out?”

“Worked what out?”

He glared at me, muttering to himself.

There’s no need to be quite so alarmed! He’s treating me almost like a clueless idiot.

I voiced this objection, and he said, “‘Almost’ doesn’t come into it. You are most definitely a clueless idiot. But,” he quickly continued, “perhaps I am as well. You’ve been no stranger to female attention, and you’ve handled it so skilfully, I’d had the impression that you were well versed in the art of romance. I was sorely mistaken, it turns out. I’ve revised my opinion: all along, you were emotionally stunted.”

“Is that so?” I replied, seething beneath my placid smile.

“Don’t make that face at me! It’s the truth.” He took a few steps back. *Did he think I was about to threaten him!?* “And no wonder. The women have always approached you, so you’ve never had to put in any effort yourself. At twenty-seven, you’re finally going through adolescence. It would be charming if it weren’t so revolting.”

“Revolting? That’s going a bit far, surely.”

“People will see delayed adolescence as charming up to about the age of twenty. At your age, it is a little disturbing for you to be so naive.”

“All of this is very confusing to me. What exactly do my state of emotional development and supposed naivety have to do with my current dilemma?”

“If you weren’t emotionally stunted, you wouldn’t even need to ask. The proof is in the pudding, as it were.” He groaned. “This is taking too long, so I’ll just tell you. The reason you’re frustrated is because you don’t make Miss

Marielle nervous. She doesn't pay you any mind, she doesn't give you attention, and you can't stomach it."

I was stunned into silence again. *What does he take me for? A baby, throwing a temper tantrum because I can't have my way?*

But how could I deny it? I realized he wasn't too far off, and it hit me like another hard shock to the system.

"Everyone wants their partner to notice them, to look at them. Of course being given the cold shoulder will make you feel lonely and upset. There's a name for that feeling, you know. It's called love."

I opened my mouth, then closed it again.

...Love?

"You're in love with Marielle. That's the answer."

I heard the words, but I couldn't process them. I had no idea how to respond.

Me? In love? With Marielle?

How can that be?

"I thank you most humbly for your advice," I said at last.

He groaned again. "Don't just try to avoid thinking about it! You're head over heels for her, admit it! There's no other explanation. Haven't I pointed out again and again how differently you've been acting around her compared to all the others? It's been a remarkable surprise, seeing you fawn over her! Think back on all the times you've smiled at Miss Marielle. I've never had the impression that it was just a fiancé doing his duty. She matters to you, and it shows on your face."

He continued, "Why did you get engaged to her in the first place? When Viscount Clarac asked if you could introduce her to a potential suitor, why did you put your own name forward? You're not very well-matched, traditionally speaking. House Flaubert's potential objections are obvious, but the proposal put quite a burden on House Clarac as well. Yet you pushed past all that and went through with it. Why?"

"Well," I stammered, "it was because..."

But then I froze, completely at a loss. I'd decided that Marielle met all of my criteria. She was exactly the kind of wife I was looking for. But was that truly the only reason? If I'd kept searching, I'm sure I'd have found other women who met my needs just as well. They weren't all twisted vipers like Miss Aurelia. I'm sure I'd have found an acceptable wife from a noble house more equal to my own.

I knew that. So why did I choose Marielle? What made her the one?

"Didn't you tell me you knew her before all this? She was the girl you were always watching, the one you found so interesting. Why did you keep observing her with such fervor if she was such a plain girl with nothing to distinguish her? If it was nothing but idle curiosity, why would you keep observing her for so many years, and ultimately propose to her?"

I had no reply to offer him. He sighed heavily and put a hand on my shoulder. "It's obvious if you really think it through. The next step is just being honest with yourself. And talking to her about it, of course. It needn't be today, tomorrow will do, but you must talk to her."

I stood there, speechless, my mind in a state of turmoil. Not only was I unable to mask my feelings, I was barely able to function at all. Panic began to set in.

Am I... How could... Could it...?

It's not possible. It's not. Is it?

Never. Not in a million years. Never!

But if it was so impossible, why was it so hard to deny? And what was so wrong about it, anyway? Or was it even a matter of right and wrong?

Isn't it... Can't it just be... Oh, damn it all! I don't even know what I'm thinking anymore!

"The one question I can't answer," said His Highness, "is why her? I can't fathom what's so appealing about her that she's captured your heart like this. She's lacking in any particular qualities that really sell her. Truth be told, I have trouble remembering her face."

But that's only what's on the surface, I thought. Inside, she's anything but

plain and ordinary. Being drawn to the real Marielle is the most natural thing in the world.

In that one instant, I realized what I'd just admitted to myself. What I couldn't deny.

And it threw me into turmoil again.

Is it true? Am I really in love with Marielle?

It's not that I didn't want to believe it. It was just so dumbfounding, I couldn't make sense of it.

I spent the rest of the evening in a state of extreme unrest. My focus on my duties was so lax, it was a minor miracle that nothing happened to His Highness.

Then I lay awake all night, like a teenage boy.

And that marked the beginning of my very belated adolescence.

Chapter Four

Lord Simeon has been acting awfully strangely as of late.

“My lady, another one has arrived again today,” said Natalie, my maid, as she entered with a single rose in hand.

“With no message or letter of any kind?”

“I’m afraid not, my lady.”

“Fair enough,” I replied. “Thank you.”

I took the rose, unwrapped its protective paper covering, and put it into a vase. I’d amassed a small collection by now, all of them the same deep crimson. Some were little more than buds, while others had already opened to their full majesty.

“This one has seen better days.” I touched one that had gone past full bloom into wilted territory. Several petals fell off and floated gently down.

“Perhaps I’d better change the water,” said Natalie, picking up the vase. “I’ll take care of it right away.”

After seeing her off, I let out a sigh. *How many days has it been now since I’ve seen Lord Simeon’s face? He hasn’t come to visit since the party that night, and he hasn’t invited me to see him either. Nor has a single letter arrived.*

All he’d sent were these roses. One rose per day, every day.

Maybe he was too busy with work, I thought. *But then he’d at least send me a message, right? Lord Simeon’s a fine, upstanding person. If it’s just a lack of time, he’d say something. He wouldn’t just ignore me like this.*

Perhaps, I considered, the worst had really happened. He’d lost all affection for me.

The thought made my heart heavy.

On the day Duke Brassiere had thrown a party at his residence, I knew that

Lord Simeon would be there, but I went on my own without saying anything. Still, I did my best not to get in his way. I knew he'd have to stay with Prince Severin, so I kept my distance. I reasoned that since I was engaged to a knight who was entrusted with the duty of personally guarding the crown prince, it wouldn't be the last time we ran into this situation. I didn't think much of it; I simply went to the party and focused on my information gathering, as I always had before.

But apparently I didn't have free rein to do that anymore. When Lord Simeon saw me and came over, his smile only barely concealed the displeasure underneath. The air was thick with it.

I suppose it came across as fairly immodest of me to go to a social event on my own when I was already engaged. Then Lord Simeon had scared me a little with how forceful and angry he seemed, so I'd run off as soon as I could after saying hello to His Highness.

And that was the last time we'd seen each other. Since then, I hadn't spoken to him, and he hadn't spoken to me. *He must really be angry. Everyone must have been shocked at what a debauched woman I am, abandoning my fiancé to have fun on my own. He can't have liked that.*

It made too much sense to deny. I'd been a bit too rash and careless, and this was the outcome. A tolerant man might not raise any complaints if his freewheeling wife went out to socialize on her own, but anyone with a more old-fashioned perspective, or anyone a bit cantankerous in general, wouldn't be so forgiving. It wasn't uncommon for there to be married couples where the wife was hardly seen in public except by her husband's side.

Lord Simeon must be that kind of man, I thought. Since we're engaged, he's treating me like his wife, so he wants to exercise control over my movements. No wonder it got his back up that I went out without permission.

I should at least have asked him, I decided. It was a poor choice not to give him any warning at all. I sighed and sighed again, regretting my mistake. *He was my once-in-a-lifetime chance, and I've probably scared him off.* He hadn't officially broken off the engagement, but we were closing in on a month without him writing me even a single letter. Perhaps, I thought with yet another

sigh, I was meant to understand that it was already over.

Natalie returned with the vase, full of fresh water but missing all the faded blooms. What was left was a beautiful display of flowers in their prime. Every petal was velvety soft and a passionate shade of red. They could have been the perfect bouquet to send a message of true love, but for me, they held a totally different meaning.

Sending a single flower every day, with no message... I wrote about that in one of my books. This is so similar, it's uncanny.

Lord Simeon told me he'd read Agnès Vivier's books, so he must have been copying the idea from there. By reenacting something from my books, he was sending me a message, silently but clearly: "I know your secret. I know everything." There was no other explanation.

But whereas the heroine of that story suffered the excitement and agitation of not knowing who was sending the flowers, Lord Simeon put his name to every single gift. Even without showing his face, he was chasing me relentlessly, sending a clear message that I couldn't run or hide from him.

Every day when I looked at the roses, they weighed upon my emotions more and more. "My fangirl fire has gone cold," I lamented. I rested my chin in my hands and let my shoulders sag. *I don't understand. I thought it would be so thrilling if Lord Simeon turned his cruel questioning skills on me, but I've found I can't enjoy it at all. It's just making me feel worse and worse.*

There could be no doubt. Lord Simeon had concluded, with certainty, that I was Agnès Vivier. That had to be the reason he was so angry with me.

But he can't have any proof, I thought. *Surely.* If he asked my publisher, they'd just have told him they couldn't divulge any private information about the author. And even if he tried to use his position of authority to force them, they'd have asked for a reason. What would he have said, that he suspected his fiancée of being Agnès Vivier? He'd be disgracing himself. Nobody who had his dislike for popular fiction would ever put themselves in that position.

If he doesn't play this carefully he could expose himself to ridicule, so he's trying to make me confess on my own. That must be it. He's just waiting... Biding his time until I can no longer bear the unrelenting deliveries of roses, day

after day after day. He's slowly pushing me closer to the cliff's edge, all while looking—to any outside observer—as if he's the ideal fiancé, showing me his affection every day.

The vicious Vice Captain strikes again, I thought. I couldn't help but be impressed, but the situation was too dire for me to fangirl over him.

I decided it might be time to just give up. We were never a good match in the first place, with his family's status being so much higher than my own. Some kind of miracle or cosmic error had led us as far as an engagement, but it had been arrogant to think we'd ever be able to get married. If Lord Simeon had given up on me, why waste my time trying to fight against it? I knew if I kept feigning ignorance, he'd eventually break off the engagement anyway, under some other pretext. That unfortunate party would have been more than enough reason on its own.

I'm sure the only reason he doesn't come right out and say it is that he's trying to do me one last act of kindness. If he breaks it off from his side, it will be widely assumed that there was something wrong with me, and word will spread through society. I'll be ruined. He must want me to come up with a suitable excuse to bow out.

It was considerate of him to approach it this way. *It's really, really, really sad*, I thought, *but it's over. Anyway, even if I can't be next to him, I can still catch glimpses of him from afar, can't I? That'll have to be enough for me.*

I thought of all the great material he'd given me in such a short span of time. *Especially the time I visited the Royal Order's headquarters and saw him holding that riding crop! It was just as I'd hoped and dreamed! It was so fantastic, that mild-mannered look with that sense of danger buried inside... Vicious, brutal, and beautiful! The phrase "a feast for the eyes" was invented for men like that, and I got to eat him right up!*

I closed my eyes and recalled the blissful spectacle. I was absorbed, spellbound. Yes, I thought, *I could write an entire book based on that one memory.*

And that would be enough, I decided. He'd brought a marvelous dream to life for me, and I didn't need anything more.

I knew my father and brother would agree to it as well. They'd always found this match to be somewhat unrealistic.

I suppressed the pain that nagged at my heart and took out my writing paper. Since that fateful party I'd been so afraid of Lord Simeon that I didn't dare try contacting him myself. But now I'd strengthened my resolve. The worst was coming, and I was quite ready for it.

I put pen to paper and composed a letter to Lord Simeon.

"I must apologize for my carelessness, which I know has left you deeply disappointed," I began. "I must convey my proper understanding of my place in society relative to yours by withdrawing from our engagement." I paused. I absolutely, positively could not say anything about my novel writing. I couldn't give him anything he could use as proof. Still, if I at least communicated that I'd resigned myself to the situation, I was certain Lord Simeon would be satisfied.

I chose every word with great care, rereading and amending it several times. At last I wrote up a neat copy, sealed it, and entrusted it to a servant. I asked him to deliver it personally to the Flaubert residence, and after seeing him off, I felt a wave of fatigue wash over me.

Well, I thought with a heavy exhalation. It's over.

I wondered if I'd become the talk of society again. I was sure that there'd be gossip flying this way and that for a while. I'd be laughed at wherever I went, and the snide remarks from Lady Aurelia's coterie would reach a new peak of triumphant haughtiness. Ordinarily I'd be ready for anything—excited, even, for all the juicy material it would give me. But for once, I couldn't muster any enthusiasm at all.

When I thought about the distance between Lord Simeon's status and my own, our engagement felt like a dream, or an illusion. This was just waking up, returning to reality. So why did I feel such crushing disappointment?

This won't do at all. I can't be downhearted forever. I need to do something to take my mind off of this.

I quickly got dressed and left the house. I didn't bring Natalie along, nor did I ask for the carriage to be prepared. I just left on foot. *I won't have to walk far to*

reach the roads frequented by carriages, and then I'm sure I can catch a passing fiacre to take me further.

As a young lady of good breeding—or, indeed, as an unmarried woman—it was quite taboo for me to go on an outing like this. That alone could lead to accusations of degeneracy. My family didn't mind, though, nor would any of the servants have tried to stop me. As long as I wore clothes that made me look like one of the common folk, no one would even notice. Anyone who looked would probably just see a servant of some house or other, out on some errand—and once I reached the city, I'd be entirely surrounded by such people, to the extent that I could blend in perfectly and even my own family wouldn't have been able to pick me out of the crowd.

I looked at my attire. *No one could think of me as anything above middle class.* Confident in my unassuming cream-colored dress, matching bonnet, and short lace-up boots, I strode briskly along the cobbled street. I took wide, assertive steps, nothing like my reserved gait at social functions. *Maybe I'll buy a chocolate crêpe and some roasted chestnuts at Chardin Square, then walk along the banks of the River Latour. I could even wander toward the marketplace, or take a gander at all the traders and newsstands on the shopping boulevard.* I wanted to soak up all the city atmosphere that I'd never have been able to see if I kept myself confined to high society. I decided it might also be worth visiting my publisher to start discussing the next book.

See? I thought to myself. *I can forget all this business about Lord Simeon and our engagement, and go back to focusing on my writing. It's just going back to normal.*

Shrugging off my defeat and trying to embrace a happier mindset had something of an effect, and I felt a little brighter already. I hailed the fiacre that was just driving past and set off into a city soaked in autumn colors.

I had a grand time shopping and sightseeing, and at last I began to think about going home, when suddenly a young woman approached me with a most unexpected question. "Excuse me, but are you the young lady from House Clarac?"

I was taken aback. With some hesitation, I replied, "I don't believe we've had

the pleasure...”

She was relatively well dressed, in her twenties, and with an air that suggested she was the servant of a high-ranking house.

“Apologies, I didn’t mean to startle you. I have a message from House Flaubert... or rather, from Lord Simeon.”

My heart thudded in my chest. *He sent a messenger? Why? Did he read my letter already?*

He must have wanted to discuss the dissolution of our engagement right away. But even so, why flag me down in public like this, I wondered? And how did Lord Simeon, or his messenger, even know I was there to begin with?

She readily answered my unspoken questions. “My master is waiting nearby. He saw you quite by coincidence and bid me ask if you’d join him. Will you accompany me to his carriage?”

This seemed quite remarkable. *How can he have just happened upon me in all the commotion of the city? The real city, no less—not a street the nobility tend to frequent.* It had to be more than just a coincidence. It was practically destiny! I began to think that Lord Simeon and I might be star-crossed lovers after all. Spotting me in a vast crowd like that... It was surely the power of love!

All right, I didn’t really think that. If this had been a story, this would have been the part where things heated up, where the reader’s heart started racing with all the romantic tension. Obviously real life would never work out that way. Too convenient!

“Which carriage is Lord Simeon’s?” I asked, looking around for one that looked suitably grand. She pointed to one that stood on the corner of a quiet street nearby, just barely visible from where we stood, its end peeking out onto the main road.

I followed the young woman toward it. As we turned the corner, I saw that the carriage bore no family crest and looked like it had been built to be inconspicuous. A single coachman waited by the horses, with no sign of any other attendants.

“Please,” urged the young woman, opening the door and gesturing to it. I

moved a little closer and peered in. As I suspected, it wasn't Lord Simeon inside.

I wasn't born yesterday, you know. If Lord Simeon had sent a messenger, it wouldn't have been a lady's maid, it would have been a male servant or a knight-in-training, right?

With a sharp shove, I was forced into the carriage. My legs were left dangling outside, but the coachman hefted them up and threw me inside. Before I could get up again, the woman got in after me and closed the door, sitting right beside it so I couldn't try to leave. The carriage sped off without a moment's pause.

"Good day, Lady Marielle," said the owner of the carriage, her voice brimming with scorn and enmity. "What a pleasant surprise to see you here!"

I smoothed out my dress, which had become rather disarrayed, and sat down on the seat opposite her. The servant took her place next to her mistress, whose lustrous blonde hair struck an elegant contrast with her rose-colored dress.

"Good day to you, too, Lady Aurelia. I'm also rather surprised, I must confess. Are you a frequent visitor to this part of the city?"

She pursed her lips. "Yes, I come here rather often to go to the theater. It's also quite diverting to look through the window and take in the bourgeois ambiance. To think that I'd see a familiar face amongst the crowds! And in such unusual clothes. You almost look like a commoner! Which suits you down to the ground, quite frankly.

"Your family must be rather unconventional, letting you walk around on your own without even a maid to accompany you. Or perhaps that's the norm for families of such low status? It would be unthinkable for anyone in my circles."

Then she laughed, a high-pitched "Ohohohoho!" that left me spellbound. She was the picture-perfect villainous young lady.

It was incredible that she'd seen me by chance while looking out of the window. Spotting me amongst the vast throngs of people... That had to be love! It was truly moving to realize how much Lady Aurelia loved me!

Well, not quite. Love and hate are two sides of the same coin, aren't they?

Sometimes things you really hate are that easy to pick out of a crowd as well. Like my mother and her sixth sense for mice.

Still, it was an impressive achievement on her part. I wasn't even dressed the way she'd normally seen me. *Maybe hate binds people together even more strongly than love... Wait, that sounds like something I can use!* I longed to write that phrase in my notebook, but it seemed like a bad time to try and pull it out.

"Well, are you just going to sit there with a vacant expression, or are you going to say something?"

Oops. I was so captivated, I'd forgotten to reply. She looked unimpressed, her spirits slightly dampened.

"I must apologize," I said. "I was distracted by your sheer perfection."

"What?" she replied, confusion evident in her voice. "If you're trying to win my favor with empty flattery, I won't fall for it."

Empty flattery? Come on, I meant every word! It depressed me that she didn't get it, to be honest.

"Goodness, no, that wasn't my intent. It was merely an expression of my admiration for you as a fangirl."

Now she was really confused. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"What I would like to ask is: why did you lure me into your carriage with a fabricated message from Lord Simeon, and where exactly are we going?" I stole a glance at the scene rushing past the window, but we turned this way and that, along streets that weren't familiar to me. We were racing along, but I had no idea where. Toward Marquess Cavaignac's residence, perhaps? But it seemed unlikely that she'd take me to the noble district.

Anyway, I'd asked what Lady Aurelia probably expected me to ask. She finally gave me a self-satisfied snort of a laugh. "I thought I'd take you somewhere very entertaining! I think you'll be quite taken with it. I can't wait to see your reaction."

"Yes, I'm also rather excited to see how things develop. However, there is one thing I feel I should tell you in advance."

“Yes?” she said, after a pause. She’d furrowed her brow again. *I suppose if someone’s that beautiful, they’re still beautiful regardless of what face they make.*

“I assume your aversion toward me is based on my engagement to Lord Simeon. If that’s the case, you might want to be aware that I’ve decided to break off the engagement. I sent him a letter about it this very day. I’m certain he feels the same, so I imagine it will be finalized quite quickly.”

“What!?” she cried, her face momentarily blank in puzzlement. *My word, I thought, when she has a blank expression like that, and the harshness all disappears, she’s pretty adorable! There we are, another one of Lady Aurelia’s hidden charms!*

“So I don’t see that there’s any further reason for you to bear me such ill will, Lady Aurelia.”

The indignation returned. “Do you expect me to believe such poppycock? I’d understand if Lord Simeon broke off the engagement, but why would *you* do it? It’s absurd!”

“Indeed,” I replied, “and in fact, I had no such intention. Unfortunately, one or two problems developed between us. He kindly arranged the situation so that I could save face in society by ending it myself, rather than Lord Simeon announcing it on his part. I’m sure it will be revealed publicly in a matter of days.”

Lady Aurelia stared at me, eyes narrowed. Of course it was hard to believe at first. I wasn’t lying, however, or even bending the truth. I returned her gaze without losing my nerve for a second. A heavy silence filled the inside of the carriage.

At last she frowned, doubt still visible on her face, and spoke again. “If what you say is true, then it’s very good news indeed. If Lord Simeon were to waste his life with a dull creature like you, I’d find it quite intolerable. I remain skeptical, however. You might just be using it as a means of escape.”

“Oh, is this a situation I need to escape from?”

Good heavens! I thought. *The thrill is too much for me.* I never thought she’d

go past idle threats and bullying to applying more forceful measures. It truly was like something out of a book. The only difference was, in a story, the heroine would have a hero to conveniently come along and rescue her, whereas I had to somehow figure this out on my own. I had to try and approach the scene with a level head, rather than just fangirling over it.

“Oh, silly me,” Lady Aurelia replied. “Yes, I said it would be entertaining, didn’t I?” A high giggle. “You may look nonchalant for now, but who knows how long you’ll be able to maintain your facade!”

Her face! I thought, my heart skipping a beat. Oh, the way it contorts with joy, like an animal toying with its prey! She’s just so stunning... A flower of evil, incarnate! Only someone with Lady Aurelia’s level of beauty and intensity could pull it off. If I tried to do the same thing, it would never work.

In my mind I was stirred up and breathless, but I kept it hidden and stayed silent. Finally, the carriage stopped in front of a building of some kind.

“Where are we?” I asked.

Considering how dark it was getting by this point, the street was surprisingly crowded. The atmosphere was quite unlike that of the legitimate shopping districts, however. *This must be what they call a pleasure quarter*, I concluded.

The street was lined with establishments that all had a distinct air of indecency. The mass of people walking by was made up overwhelmingly of men. The women that were sporadically dotted here and there looked like they knew their way around, you might say.

“We’ve arrived at a very particular venue,” said Lady Aurelia. “People come here to eat, take in some music, have a good time. Go on. This is our stop.”

The lady’s maid opened the door. The coachman was already in position outside, and he forcibly pulled me out into the street. Lady Aurelia descended after me.

“Are we visiting a brothel?” I asked, barely able to contain my excitement. “It’s like a dream come true!”

“A dream come true!?”

Oops. I got a bit too eager and said what I was really thinking.

“Oh, no,” I blurted out, “I mean, gentlemen come here to make their dreams come true.” *Smoothly does it.*

I did my best to restrain my unbridled enthusiasm, but it was tough. There I stood, before a place I’d never been able to even approach, let alone go inside. A forbidden world.

“Don’t you worry,” she said with a giggle. “This is by far the most high-class locale of its kind in all of Petibon. The clientele is made up exclusively of noblemen.”

Petibon... Yes, I remember. That’s the name of the biggest pleasure quarter in the whole city of Sans-Terre. And we’re going to Tarentule, the best brothel in Petibon!? The one even the royal family is said to visit in secret—THAT Tarentule!? I wonder if Prince Severin will be there!?

“And I’m to work here!?” I cried, unable to constrain the thrill of adventure provoked in me by this place I’d only heard rumors of.

“I beg your pardon?” She arched her eyes skyward, and sneered derisively, “Well, if you really want to, I can ask them... But I doubt you’d draw many clients.”

True, I suppose. Put me next to all those incomparable beauties and I wouldn’t stand a chance.

No, look, I’m not saying I was disappointed, all right? Being forced into prostitution isn’t exactly a fairytale. I didn’t want it to happen to me in real life. Even if it did thrill me a bit, I understood the situation I was in. It was a relief that Lady Aurelia didn’t have quite such sinister plans.

Nope, I wasn’t disappointed at all. Not one bit. Nope.

Well, if nothing else, there was no point in collecting even the most perfect reference material if I couldn’t get home to write about it. Being forced to stay here and sell my body would be quite inconvenient.

But this made me wonder why she’d actually brought me here.

While we were talking, another carriage had stopped nearby. The young man

who stepped out had a face I recognized.

“Good evening, Jacob,” Lady Aurelia called to him in a sweet, high-pitched tone. “Thank you for joining me at such short notice.”

As I thought, it was Lord Jacob, the son of Baron Morey. I’d heard he was one of Lady Aurelia’s most ardent followers. He always seemed very impressed with his own dedicated service to the one he loved, while others made fun of him behind his back for essentially being her errand boy, summoned and dismissed as she pleased.

This type of thing did come up once in a while as I casually gathered all the gossip I could. Lady Aurelia and her hangers-on were rather frequent subjects of scorn and slander. Considering how much they liked denigrating others, I wonder if they knew how much the rest of high society liked badmouthing them in return.

“Lady Aurelia,” he began, “my golden rose! At your summons, I’d run to the very ends of the earth. Though I am but a foolish servant of love, I beg you, pray tell me your command this fair autumnal eventide. Anything you desire, if it is within my power, I shall answer the call.”

With passion lighting up his eyes, Lord Jacob delivered a speech that sounded like he’d cribbed it from a play. *He clearly thinks VERY highly of himself.*

“Thanks. What I’d like you to do is take this girl here into this establishment with you. I’d like you to give her a tour of the type of place that a respectable young woman wouldn’t normally have the opportunity to visit.”

Lord Jacob shifted his gaze from her to me, and all the passion vanished. In an instant, he wore an ice-cold expression, like I was less than a person, perhaps no more than a pebble on the ground.

“Who is this shabby-looking girl? She doesn’t look like she belongs anywhere near you. She can’t even be your maid, for you’d surely choose a more elegant maid.”

“Ohohoho!” she laughed. “Indeed, she is not. This is Lady Marielle of House Clarac. She went out dressed this way on purpose. She wanted to see how the other half lived, she told me.” This story of Lady Aurelia’s was an attempt to

further embarrass me, but it was actually remarkably close to the truth.

“House Clarac? Ah, yes.” Lord Jacob’s eyes grew colder still. To him, I must have amounted to mere refuse, polluting the space in front of Lady Aurelia.

“Since she put in all that effort, I thought I’d give her a helping hand. She deserves to see *every* aspect of society. I can’t go in there myself, of course, so I’d like you to accompany her. All you need to do is have dinner and sit at a table for a while. In the public area, of course. Don’t get a private room.”

In other words, Lady Aurelia’s plan was to send me into a brothel, make sure that I was seen by the clientele (including, no doubt, many noblemen), and thereby make me a source of malicious gossip.

For a young woman of noble birth to be seen entering a brothel would be quite a scandal. Were it to be not only a rumor, but corroborated fact, I wouldn’t be able to show my face in high society ever again. *Lord Simeon would break off our engagement instantly*, I thought. *Perhaps Lady Aurelia thought that even if I was lying about it already being over, this would be a fallback to ensure that it came true.*

I quickly rejected that idea. She’d clearly asked Lord Jacob to join her here before she kidnapped me. *Still, for her to notice me in the city totally by chance, then come up with a plan on the spot and execute it straight away... It’s wonderful indeed! She’s practically the model citizen of villains!*

I tried to snap out of it. This wasn’t the time to be fangirling! And in fact, this plan was a bit of a letdown. To be perfectly honest, I was expecting more. Sitting me down in the brothel and letting other people see me? *If that’s really the nastiest thing she can come up with, I guess she was raised a bit too well. Although*, I mused, *I’m also meant to be a young lady of good upbringing. Why is it I can come up with much worse? It must be because I’ve read too many books.*

It was comforting to know that I wouldn’t be subjected to the worst things I’d feared. Still, Lady Aurelia’s plan had plenty of potential for ruining my life.

I wanted to see inside the brothel so badly...but I had to prioritize my safety over my curiosity.

I took a stealthy look around to see if I could escape somehow. That was when I spotted a rowdy bunch of men lumbering our way. Commoners—and already rather squiffy, by the sound of things. Their cheers and laughter rang through the night.

They soon noticed us too, and gave us their full attention. No big surprise there: fancy brothel or otherwise, a well-dressed man and woman having a chat outside the front door is going to catch the eye.

“Oi, are you some kind of princess, or what? You ain’t just a stunner, you look like the real deal!”

“That’s what you get with a joint like Tarentule. Even the girls they put outside to draw in the lads are proper good-lookers!”

“Forget this little baby boy, let me show you what a *real* man’s like. I’ll be the best client you’ve ever had!”

All of this was directed at Lady Aurelia, of course. Her lady’s maid was on the receiving end of a few comments as well, but my presence didn’t register in the men’s consciousness at all.

“Get away from me!” Lady Aurelia shrieked, recoiling from the men’s unwanted hands. “Don’t touch me, you foul brutes!”

Lord Jacob leapt in front of her. “Be gone from our sight, baseborn scum! This fair maiden shall never be the plaything of such vile riffraff!”

He put on quite an impressive display. He stood firm, resolute, like the gallant love interest in a romance novel. His face shook with all his determination to keep Lady Aurelia safe.

“Buzz off,” said one of the men. Without even looking at Lord Jacob, he casually waved an arm and sent him tumbling to the ground with a *thud*. Lord Jacob groaned, his face buried in the cobblestones.

Well, he won’t be getting up anytime soon. That’s reality, I suppose. Love and courage aren’t enough to fix all your problems. Harsh, but true.

The coachman tried to save the young ladies as well, but he also suffered a blow and fell to the ground. Lady Aurelia and her maid both let out high-pitched

screams. The men put their arms around them, and it looked very much like they would be dragged away against their will.

“No! Stop! Why is this happening to me!?”

Do you even need to ask? I thought. *If you come to a place like this at night, of course something like this is going to happen.*

Noble or otherwise, it’s not a good idea for a young woman to casually stroll into the pleasure districts. That’s just common sense.

I should probably have been counted amongst those young women, but the group of men still hadn’t even noticed me. I’d kept very close to the carriage, so perhaps I’d blended in with it and wasn’t really visible.

I started to think about sneaking away and calling for help, when suddenly—

“Hey! You there! What do you think you’re doing!”

—Help found us first. This rallying cry was accompanied by another band of men, swooping down on the ones who meant to abduct Lady Aurelia.

Interesting. They’re dressed in normal clothes, but underneath, they’re definitely soldiers. They moved with well-trained finesse, not the lumbering strikes of amateurs. The drunkards were driven off in seconds. Crisis averted, Lady Aurelia began to cry.

“Are you unharmed?” one of the men asked. “You are the young lady of House Cavaignac, are you not? I must ask why you’d come to a place like this.”

“I-I don’t know!” she spluttered, drawing back in dismay. “I was just passing through!” Clearly, being caught here hadn’t been part of her scheme. As it dawned on her that the plan she’d set in motion for me was now occurring with her as the victim, she hurriedly turned away, shielding her face.

She and her maid vaulted into the carriage. The coachman, who’d somehow got to his feet, also rushed back into position and set the horses in motion with a crack of his riding crop. The carriage sped off, leading a dumbfounded group of soldiers in their wake.

“Lady Aurelia!” bellowed Lord Jacob, who had also recovered somewhat. “My rose! Wait for me!” He spoke in a predictably dramatic manner, but having

been beaten up and then abandoned, his presentation left something to be desired. Realizing that all eyes were on him, he made haste toward his own carriage.

But his coachman had disappeared. A moment of searching revealed that he'd secluded himself in the shadows some time earlier, petrified of all the commotion.

"What in blazes are you doing? Get up at once!"

Seeing his master under attack and choosing to run and hide instead of helping did not seem like a wise career move.

Then the second carriage sped off as well, leaving me on my own.

It's so mean that you'd just forget about me, Lady Aurelia. You can't shirk your responsibilities as a villain! You've got to follow it through to the end!

There was nothing for it but to walk to wherever I could catch another fiacre, so I set off. At that moment, the men who'd come to help noticed that I was there. One put a hand out to stop me. "This way, please, my lady." He accompanied his very polite request with a gesture toward a carriage that stood nearby. I wondered when it had arrived. I certainly hadn't seen it.

"Forgive me for asking, but..."

"You needn't worry, my lady. Our master will keep you safe."

With that, the soldier pretending to be an ordinary citizen led me to the carriage. I wondered who would turn up this time. I drifted along, lost in thought.

When the door opened, my eyes turned into saucers.

"Get in," the man inside ordered sternly. "You shouldn't be seen here."

The soldier behind me hurried me inside as well, and I bundled myself into the carriage. I hesitated for a moment, overcome with nerves, but I was soon told to sit, so I gingerly took my place opposite my new host.

He let out an exasperated sigh. "Yours is a face I didn't expect to see around here. I hope you intend to tell me what you're doing in this neighborhood."

Black hair, with dark eyes that glared at me. His appeal was entirely different from Lord Simeon's, but this young man's masculine beauty was a proud sight to behold.

The shock of the situation got the better of me, and I replied without thinking. "I might ask you the same thing, Your Highness. I never thought I'd happen upon you in the city at all, let alone in a dark corner such as this." My voice grew more animated. "Are you here to visit Tarentule? Is it true, then? Even the royal family visits Tarentule, as the rumors say? Is there a particular lady of the evening that you favor? Will you tell me about her?"

"That's the first thing you say!?" he shot back. "Why would you ask that, and *why* are your eyes sparkling!?"

I suddenly noticed that Prince Severin, too, was not dressed as he usually was. He wouldn't have passed for a commoner, of course, but his attire was plain enough to suggest a mid-ranking noble, perhaps. It was clear at a glance that he was also trying to sneak about unrecognized.

Are you really in a position to judge me, Your Highness? However you dress up or dress down, your good looks and your distinguished nature will give the game away eventually. At best, I felt, his efforts would only be effective at a distance.

I rushed to apologize. "My deepest apologies, Your Highness. I let my curiosity get the better of me."

"Even so, your questions were excessively forward! But never mind." He cleared his throat and returned to his usual demeanor. "Time is running short, so I'll ask you to explain all this later. In the meantime, follow me and stay quiet. Don't do or say anything on the way."

"Understood," I said, confirming it with a deferential nod. The crown prince had spoken, and I couldn't disobey.

The carriage moved only a short distance before it stopped again. At His Highness's urging, I got out.

We were right in front of the entrance to Tarentule.

I could hardly breathe. The forbidden flower garden was right before my very eyes. Enchanting music could be heard coming from inside. It even smelled

good. The entrance was built in the style of a noble manor, and there were no bustling crowds nearby to disturb the elegant atmosphere. A well-dressed man in the style of a butler even came to greet us.

His Highness, who had already marched on ahead, shouted back at me, “It’s just the front door, there’s no need to be quite so moved. Hurry up.”

What? I thought. *I’m allowed to...go inside!? Here I go, then! My first step into an unseen world!*

I stepped onto the red carpet laid out across the corridor’s marble floor. It absorbed the sound of every footstep. I kept pace with the prince, following behind him, my heart pounding in my chest. *But where are all the beautiful women!?*

We proceeded without encountering a single other soul. The corridor was lined with doors on either side, and our guide opened one on the right. From the left I could hear the faint sounds of music and laughter, but from the right, nothing. We walked along an empty passageway and climbed several staircases, arriving at the third floor.

“This way, please,” said the guide once we reached a secluded chamber. “Your guest has already arrived.”

Is this some sort of secret rendezvous!? I’d heard there were establishments in the city that offered this kind of service, but I’d never have expected Tarentule, of all places, to be one of them. After all, it was so full of alluring courtesans that the gentleman’s eyes would surely be drawn this way and that, away from the lady he’d invited here!

I was a ship, thrown this way and that by the waves of surprise and emotion that crashed into me, over and over and over. I followed His Highness into the room, and it was as magnificent as I’d imagined. A glistening chandelier hung from the ceiling. Below was a couch with a gentleman sitting on it.

The man stood and greeted His Highness with a bow. The latter replied, “Sorry I’m so late. I picked something up along the way, you see.”

“You’ve no need for any manner of apology, I assure you. You’re slightly earlier than the time we agreed upon. This ‘something’ you picked up—it’s that

charming young lady you have with you?" He chuckled. "I can't imagine who'd have dropped her."

He turned to face me, his demeanor calm and refined. I saw in his elegant features that he recognized me. "Good evening, Miss Marielle. Quite an unexpected place for a reunion, I'm sure you'll agree."

"It's good to see you again, Ambassador Van Leer. So you're His Highness's 'guest' here tonight."

The person waiting for His Highness inside the room was Vissel's new ambassador. I was so sure it would be a beautiful young lady, but imagine that! An illicit rendezvous with a refined older gentleman! Certainly not the twist I'd been expecting, but not outside the realm of reason. A dashing handsome younger man with an equally handsome older man, why, that's just another classic pairing!

It also neatly sidesteps any concern about wandering eyes. I guess any woman, no matter how beautiful, is outside their range of interests.

"Why do I have this distinct feeling that you're misinterpreting the situation?" asked His Highness after a pause, glaring at me with a faint look of discomfort. *Oh my, was it all over my face?*

"I occasionally hold meetings here, when they're of a highly confidential nature. Keeps away the prying eyes, you see. That's all. We each enter separately, appearing to all the world as normal clients, then we meet here, where we know the staff can be trusted to keep their customers' secrets.

"This goes without saying," he continued with a decidedly casual air, "but keep your lips sealed when it comes to anything you see or hear tonight. Even your family mustn't learn about any of it. If you go blurting it all out, it won't just be you who is silenced—permanently—but everyone in House Clarac. Is that understood?"

"Of course, Your Highness. I won't say a word to anyone, I swear it. And tonight I'll just be a silent guardian, watching over the two of you as you spend this time together."

"For our MEETING!" he said through gritted teeth. "That part is clear as well,

yes? Our meeting? To discuss politics?”

I wasn't sure why he'd become so anxious all of a sudden, when I'd promised him my silence in a properly forthright manner. Did he feel so unable to trust me? I do have some discretion, you know. I understood that I couldn't use any of this as material for my novels, for example.

“First of all, however, we'll talk about you. What on earth were you doing in this part of the city, in that sort of garb? And the pair that were with you... Aurelia Cavaignac and Jacob Morey, wasn't it? What were you doing with them?”

As he spoke, His Highness placed me in a chair in the same manner that one would handle a kitten, then took a seat himself. Though it felt odd to be talking of such things in the presence of a foreign ambassador, I started to explain the particulars of what had happened to me that day.

It was common knowledge in society that Lady Aurelia had a tendency to bully anyone she disliked, so His Highness was not especially surprised. He was shocked that she'd employ quite such a malicious scheme, but he was equally shocked that I'd gone out on my own, so you might say it was six of one, half a dozen of the other. Ambassador Van Leer didn't open his mouth at all, but I did see a smile creep up at the edges of it as he listened.

“Bloody hell,” said the prince at last. “I'd understood you to be so reserved that you were *too* reserved, a plain girl with no distinguishing features. Today you seem to be chock-full of surprises. All this after you turned Simeon's face a ghastly pale color with your letter!”

“You know about the letter?” I asked.

“I gather that he told a servant to let me know as soon as any communication arrived from you. Report came to the palace directly from House Flaubert. This is why Simeon couldn't accompany me this evening, you realize. Given how hard he was trembling, he'd no doubt bang his hand and foot on the corner of the table at the same time, which would only make him more agitated. Then his glasses would fall off... Fat lot of good he'd do me in that state.

“I sent him off right away, insisting he go and see you. I can't suppose he found you, since you're here.”

“Indeed, he did not. I left the house as soon as I’d sent the letter.”

His Highness let out a deep sigh, heavy with exhaustion. He rested an elbow on his chair and pressed his fingers to his temple. There was something strangely coquettish about that pose. It set off my fangirl sense just a tiny bit.

“Why did you tell him you wanted to break off the engagement?”

I tilted my head. *Oh*. “You know about that as well?”

“Simeon wasn’t merely out of sorts, he was out of his right mind. Of course I asked him what you’d written. What reason do you have to be dissatisfied with him? Well, perhaps it’s not so astonishing. He’s a flawed man, I’ll grant. He’s known as a skilled tactician, but in all honesty, he’s so intensely serious, he can’t adapt to anything outside his purview. He gets confused by the simplest things sometimes. He’s really not as fine a catch as he looks.”

I nodded along as I listened. *Yes, Lord Simeon is a very serious fellow. I’d thought so since the engagement, but I confirmed it by talking to the Captain and his subordinates. Within the Royal Order of Knights, Lord Simeon is known as an excessively serious person.*

He was most certainly the cerebral type. Everything he did, he did with great ingenuity and resourcefulness. However, even though he strove to work in a very serious manner, he was always fair to other people, and had consideration for them even when he was being harsh. His men had great affection for him. Even as they complained about him, calling him the Demon Vice Captain, they always wore a smile.

The image I’d had of Lord Simeon before wasn’t entirely accurate. It had something of a discrepancy with who he really was. When I found out he wasn’t the brutal, black-hearted military officer I had imagined, I thought I’d be disappointed, but strangely enough, I wasn’t. If anything, it gave him a new kind of appeal. He was like the opposite of a dark horse.

Appearances can be deceiving...but it feels good to be fangirling over the real thing!

Only a kind person like that would arrange things so that I could break off the engagement first, rather than just doing it without warning from his side. *It was*

very thoughtful of him. Although I suppose it was still a bit mean-spirited to bear down on me so relentlessly without saying a single word.

“But he’s damned trustworthy as well,” His Highness continued. “No worries about him straying from the beaten path, as it were. He’s not crafty like that. Once he’s married, he’ll save himself for his wife. No funny business with other women. And even if he can be set in his ways, he’s far from a tyrant. He wouldn’t be a rotten husband who keeps his wife under his thumb. As long as you don’t go completely overboard, he’d allow you a certain degree of freedom.”

One after another, His Highness gave arguments in Lord Simeon’s defense. It seemed odd, however. Why was he going to such efforts to excuse Lord Simeon’s flaws? How was this relevant?

“Every word you speak is quite true, Your Highness. I have no complaints about Lord Simeon’s character whatsoever.”

“Then what in blazes is the problem!? Trouble with your future mother-in-law, is that it? I know for a fact that Earl and Countess Flaubert have raised no objections to the match. All details aside, they’ve been concerned for a while that their son might never get married. They were thrilled to learn of your engagement.”

How odd, I thought. His Highness seems so sure that I must be the one with the problem. Lord Simeon can’t have told him that he’s the one who has a problem with me.

I mulled over how I could express this to the prince. I glanced at Ambassador Van Leer. *I’d rather not say anything too embarrassing in front of an unrelated party.*

I said plainly that Lord Simeon had reacted with some anger to my appearance at the duke’s gathering. I said nothing about my writing—instead, I related that he couldn’t possibly tolerate a fiancée who was brazen enough to go to a party on her own despite being engaged. Since then, I explained, he hadn’t come to see me even once, which was his way of condemning me in an indirect way, rather than telling me directly. Naturally, he was silently urging me to withdraw from the engagement myself for the benefit of my social standing,

and understanding this, I'd sent the letter—

With every word I spoke, His Highness's mouth fell further and further open. I understood how he felt, but he didn't need to deride me like that. I'd made a small mistake in attending the party, but I was still a rejected fiancée in a state of heartbreak. I had feelings.

The ambassador, meanwhile, shrugged his shoulders, stifling a laugh. Clearly, something was very amusing. He turned to face away from me, gripped the arm of his chair and shook softly. *How mean!* I thought. *But what's so funny about me breaking off my engagement, anyway? Or is he just the type to laugh at anything?*

"I have no words," said His Highness at last, half sighing as he spoke. His face looked somehow drained of all energy. "He hasn't been to see you since that night? Not even once?"

"No," I replied.

"He hasn't even sent a letter?"

"Neither a letter, nor any other message. He did send me something else, every single day, but I took it as a sign that he was urging me to break off the engagement."

"Well, what was it?" His Highness asked, seemingly quite perplexed.

I didn't know what to tell him. Explaining why roses had taken on that meaning would mean telling him all of my secrets. Lord Simeon might tell him anyway, I thought, but I still couldn't confess to it myself.

A silence fell across the room. At that moment, a knock came at the door.

One of His Majesty's guards entered. I didn't recognize him, but I was fairly sure he was a knight of the royal guard.

"Your Highness, the Vice Captain is here."

"Send him in."

"Right away, Your Highness."

The knight walked away briskly. When the door opened again, Lord Simeon

entered.

He said nothing, but the beautiful eyes behind his glasses fixed themselves directly on me. His usually faultless hair and uniform were slightly disheveled, perhaps because he'd hurried to get here. No doubt he'd be very angry to learn how I'd embarrassed myself in front of his master and a foreign ambassador by behaving so indecently while our engagement was not yet formally dissolved. He said nothing at first. He only stood there and stared at me.

Then he cleared his throat and placed himself between me and the others. "I want to talk to you alone. Let's use the next room." He pointed to a door on the opposite side that led to a connecting room.

Only then did he notice His Highness's presence. With a start, Lord Simeon lowered his eyes and head. "Your Highness, I must apologize for my presumption."

"Worry not. Talk for as long as you need to. Just be sure to clear up this little misunderstanding."

Misunderstanding?

Urged on by His Highness, I stood. As I delivered a hurried attempt at a curtsy to His Highness and the ambassador, Lord Simeon ushered me along into the neighboring room.

But as soon as he entered, he froze and looked on in shock. There in the center of the room stood an imposing-looking bed with a canopy, large enough for three people.

Aha! I thought. So this is where people do the deed! First a little food, a little drink...and then they come in here for a little bit of this, a little bit of that. This room had no bright lights, only a few small lamps dotted about. The dark space felt tantalizingly shady. The curtains that hung from the canopy were a classy yet sultry shade of purple. I bet there are times when a man spends long hours lying on this bed talking about love, only for the woman in his arms to turn around and ask for money and gifts...

"Marielle, what are you doing?"

Lord Simeon's voice cut into my daydreaming. *Oops*, I thought. I'd been

stroking the bedsheets while observing the pattern on the curtains. *Oh, and the pillows smell so good.*

“It makes me nervous, that’s all. Do you come here often, Lord Simeon?”

“I-I-I’m only here for work!” he stuttered. “I’ve only ever been here to escort His Highness! Not with any other intentions!”

“I hear the three most highly prized flowers at Tarentule right now are Olga, Isabelle, and Chloe. Have you ever met them, Lord Simeon? Which is your favorite?”

“How do you know any of that!?”

How indeed! I even knew that Olga had brown hair, Isabelle had red hair, and Chloe was a blonde.

Just because I’d never been here before didn’t mean I hadn’t heard *plenty* of gossip. I was praying that I’d one day get a glimpse of these women in person.

Lord Simeon brushed his bangs away with his hand, let out an exasperated breath, and repositioned his glasses. “I hardly know where to start. I might as well ask what you’re doing here, first of all. Of all the places to take refuge, it’s baffling that you’d end up here.”

“It’s rather a long story. Perhaps it’s better if you ask His Highness about it later.” It would be quite a burden to have to tell the same story again, after all.

Lord Simeon scowled, but nodded. “You’re right, of course. That’s not the most important thing right now. What I’d really like to ask you about is why you want to break off the engagement. Why, Marielle?”

He stared at me with dampened eyes. I cocked my head in confusion. *You’re the one asking me?*

“What is it that’s so intolerably wrong with me? I just don’t understand women’s feelings. If I did something to hurt you without realizing, please, tell me what I did. I’ll do better, I swear it!”

WHAT?

I tilted my head so far, it practically fell off. I heard the words, but they made no sense whatsoever. *What does any of this have to do with...anything!?*

I thought Lord Simeon had lost all affection for me. Now it turned out that he thought I'd lost my affection for him? *But how did he get that impression? I don't understand!*

"So..." I began warily. "You didn't want the engagement to be canceled?"

"Me? Why would you think that?" His eyes widened and his eyebrows shot up.

I must confess, seeing how handsome and imposing he looked with that dramatic expression on his face made me enchanted by him all over again. "I suppose there's no use in hiding it any longer, so I'll just confess. You...know my secret, don't you?"

"Your secret? That you write novels, you mean?" A very frank answer on his part.

I nodded.

"And they're published under the name Agnès Vivier? Not that I've been in any doubt about that."

"How did you find out? It's true, in any case. I'm Agnès Vivier. You find it disgraceful that a well-bred young woman would write and sell popular fiction, I'm sure."

"What?"

"To make matters worse, I attended the duke's party on my own, despite our engagement. You must have thought me not only disgraceful, but entirely lacking in self-control. That's why you were so angry with me, isn't it? I'm so sorry.

"Since then, you haven't invited me to see you, or sent any letters or messages, but sending me a rose every day was a clear message that you knew about my writing. That you wanted to break off the engagement. Only, you knew that if you ended it yourself, I'd face all kinds of vicious rumors. People would assume I'd been unfaithful. So you silently encouraged me to be the one to withdraw—isn't that right? The match was far better than my rank deserved to begin with, so this way, society would accept it as a matter of course."

His mouth fell open too as he gawked at me. Now it was his turn to tilt his head in confusion. In fact, as I spoke, his head had gradually tilted to such an angle that I wasn't sure it could ever return to its original position. That's how deeply bewildered he seemed to be.

At last the words "How did this happen?" escaped from his throat. A vague croak, not even directed at me, but formed without conscious awareness on his part. He pressed on his forehead as if to keep himself steady, and stood deep in thought. Finally, reading his face, I realized for the first time that there might be some possibility that I'd misunderstood his intentions.

"Am I mistaken?"

"*Entirely* mistaken!" he cried. "What on earth led you to that conclusion!? All right, I'll confess that the way I behaved that night was regrettable. I had a narrow-minded view of the situation. I didn't listen to what you said, because I was thinking about something else, and...I was sulking. For reasons of my own."

"Sulking?" I replied.

"A-a-and as I said, I regret the whole thing!" he stammered. "You did nothing wrong. I was simply in a bad mood, and I apologize. True, you went to a social gathering on your own, but so what? What problem did it cause? None at all. I'd have preferred it if we'd let each other know our intentions beforehand, but I'm certainly not angry about it."

"Oh," I said at last. This was quite a surprise. It turned out Lord Simeon was actually quite accepting.

But then, why did he look so sullen that night? He said it was for a different reason, but what could possibly cause Lord Simeon to sulk like that?

"What I regret most of all is not coming to see you since then. I can't apologize enough. Work has been so busy, you see, and... Well, no, that's only half the story. The truth is, meeting you felt...difficult, somehow."

"Because we'd parted on bad terms that night?"

"Exactly. And I'd realized one or two things, so I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep my composure the next time we met. I thought it would be easier if I waited until I'd calmed down, but on the contrary, it just became more and

more difficult.”

I nodded. *Yes, that’s a feeling I know well.*

If you have an argument, it’s better to apologize and make up as soon as possible. If you wait until you calm down, you’ll end up waiting so long that it just adds to the awkwardness.

Julianne and I had a falling out a long time ago. It was all my fault, and I instantly regretted it, but it took two months before we made up, and that was only with my grandmother’s help. Since then, we’ve always tried to apologize and make up as soon as possible after any argument.

Thinking back to that, I more or less understood where Lord Simeon was coming from. Things were uneasy between us, and that was still playing on his mind, but not to such an extent that he’d want to break things off. He’d sent me a rose every day as an attempt to apologize. He hadn’t been trying to silently torment me after all.

Oh dear, I thought. I completely misunderstood.

“I’m so sorry, it seems I was laboring under a grave misapprehension. I was so sure that the roses were meant to impress upon me that you knew I was an author, that there was no use hiding it.”

In response, Lord Simeon’s face became a picture of misery. *If his men saw their Demon Vice Captain looking like this, I imagine they’d be quite surprised.*

But I was surprised, too. He’d lost all his intensity, and the man that remained was somehow adorable. *But I’d better keep that to myself!* I felt a strong stirring in my chest.

“It saddens me greatly that you took it that way,” he said, haltingly. “I just thought you liked that sort of thing.”

“Really? Why?”

A pause. “You wrote about it, didn’t you?”

“Oh. I suppose I did.”

I mean, yes, I did write that in one of my books. It was a whole story where she finally found out who’d been sending the roses, and she realized he loved

her and had been watching over her all along, so eventually they get together after all kinds of ups and downs and misunderstandings.

And...he was just copying that? That's all? But he didn't keep his identity secret—he put his name to every delivery. Why wouldn't I think he had different intentions? ...Right?

I can't believe his reason for sending me roses was so pure and wholesome. I'm so sorry, Lord Simeon! Sorry I thought it was a cruel scheme to chase me down and corner me!

I definitely couldn't tell him that I preferred violets and lilies-of-the-valley to roses.

"Well, I..." I began. No more words came from Lord Simeon, who was hunched over, crestfallen, so I started to reply while still arranging my thoughts. "I'd like to say thank you, first of all. And I'd like to apologize again for my misunderstanding. But does this mean I should understand that you don't wish to break off the engagement?"

"Yes," he murmured, nodding. "I've never even considered that, not for a moment."

"I don't intend to stop writing my novels, you know."

"That's quite all right. I'll grant it's nothing we can reveal to the public, but on a personal level, I don't see any issue. I told you already, didn't I? I enjoyed your books very much. If the stories had all been silly nonsense I might think differently, but when I read them, there was nothing that made me uncomfortable. Quite the opposite—there were many aspects of them that left a deep impression on me."

...Wow.

Lord Simeon's attitude had gone beyond acceptance and straight into godliness. That he'd not only allow me to continue writing, but look upon my books so favorably, was quite remarkable. They were books written by a woman, about women, for women. For a man to have such a high opinion of them was a pleasure I could never have dreamed of.

Does this mean Lord Simeon has a bit of a feminine side as well? No wonder it

looks so perfect when he and Prince Severin are standing side by side—

“Marielle?” he interrupted, waving a hand in front of my face.

Oops. I’d slipped into the world of my fevered imagination again.

In my emotionally charged state, I inched closer to Lord Simeon. “Thank you so much! Next time I’ll write something based on you! You don’t mind, isn’t that right? And can I pair you with a black-haired gentleman?”

“*Pair* me? In what sense!?”

Suddenly, behind me, laughter burst forth—not one laughing voice, but a collection of them.

“Did she really say that? I love it!”

“There goes the image of the cold-blooded knight! What a riot!”

“You lot! Stop that!” cut in Prince Severin.

“But you’re laughing too, Your Highness,” came the reply.

The ambassador laughed as well. “Ah, to be young again! It brings a smile to my face!”

“Less a smile and more a belly laugh, wouldn’t you say, Ambassador?”

“Oh, not at all,” he replied. “And I *definitely* wasn’t thinking about who that black-haired fellow would be based on.”

“I feel a need to object on an official, diplomatic level,” said the prince. “Just to ensure that this little misunderstanding doesn’t cross international borders.”

“I think it’s great!” came another voice. “I adore that kind of thing!”

“There’s nothing to adore!” the prince replied, frantic. “No kind of thing is going on!”

It seemed the door, which I thought we’d closed behind us, had slipped open at some point. It was more than only one or two figures that I could hear jostling just beyond it.

Lord Simeon and I stood in stunned silence for a moment, then subtly moved a step or two away from one another.

“No need for you to peek in and whisper about us in such a vulgar manner,” said Lord Simeon, turning toward the door and flashing that menacing smile of his—beautiful but deadly. “Surely you’d rather come in. We’ll gladly welcome you.”

Wow! I felt breathless all of a sudden. There he is. The brutal, black-hearted military officer. My exact type. Oh, Lord Simeon, you’re so wonderful!

He noticed me staring at him, my chest heaving. He coughed to clear his throat, and then his expression returned to normal again.

Then, right in that very spot, he got down on one knee. Before I had time for any thought except sheer surprise, he took my hand in his and lowered his head.

“Allow me to propose to you again, Marielle. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

I screamed inside. My heart raced for quite a different reason than before. It was like we were in a story, and this was the romantic climax. Still spellbound by the kiss he bestowed on my hand, I nodded my assent.



“I would love to. There’s no one I could ever fangirl over more than you. Please, let me stay by your side and watch you forever and ever.”

He paused for a moment. “...Absolutely.”

Hmm. Did his answer seem a tiny bit unsure there, or am I imagining things?

Before I had time to ask, the people lurking outside the door came piling in.

One practically shrieked, then said, “What a moment to witness!”

“Lord Simeon’s so cute when he’s with his fiancée!”

“You’re so right! It’s so much fun seeing a man that’s such a tough nut to crack get so adorably flustered!”

Oh, I thought, realizing who it was. Oh!

It was them. The Three Flowers of Tarentule had charged into the room.

My eyes were drawn directly toward their pale white breasts. *How audacious, to wear necklines that are cut so low! Such abundant cleavage... I’m dazzled!*

The dreamlike seductresses crowded around us and pressed into us.

“Such coarse manners,” Lord Simeon grumbled. “Don’t you ladies have any sense of decorum?”

“You’re the one who said to come in, Lord Simeon!” one replied.

“Precisely!” said another, the one with red hair. “And more importantly,” she said, cupping my cheeks with her hands and turning me toward her, “is it true that you’re Agnès Vivier? *The Agnès Vivier!?*”

Velvety soft hands. A scent so sweet, my heart beat faster still.

And her cleavage. Right in front of my face.

“Y-Yes,” I murmured, barely managing a nod.

All three of them squealed with joy.

“Incredible! Agnès Vivier, in the flesh!”

“I have ALL your books! My favorite is *Love’s Castle in the Mists!*”

“I never knew they were written by such a cute little lady! Will you give me

your autograph later?”

Swarmed by the three beauties, before long I was separated from Lord Simeon. He stood across the room, where Prince Severin and Ambassador Van Leer had each put a hand on one of his shoulders to console him.

I could hardly choose where to look. On one side of the room, astoundingly beautiful women. On the other side, gloriously beautiful men. *What pure bliss. I'm in paradise. They're all so dazzling, I'll go blind!*

“Are you...” I began, my voice full of nerves. “Olga, Isabelle, and Chloe, by any chance?”

“Gosh, you’ve heard of us?”

“Of course!” I replied, picking up speed. “You’re the Three Flowers of Tarentule! I’ve been longing to meet you, more than anyone else in all of Sans-Terre!”

“What a thing for a young noblewoman to say! We’re just prostitutes, you know.”

“Just prostitutes!? You’re anything but! You’re known for being exceptionally skilled and well-educated ladies! And you’re not tied to any contract—you’re career women, carrying out your work with pride! You’re not products that can be bought with mere money, but heavenly angels that refuse to lie with anyone they don’t take a fancy to, regardless of how often they plead or how many gifts they give you! And even amongst such heavenly angels, you’re the pinnacle! You’re true goddesses!”

“Again, how do you know any of that?” said Lord Simeon somewhere in the distance. But I couldn’t give him my attention, not when I had these goddesses before me. I was mesmerized.

What a magical day, I thought to myself. Lady Aurelia gave me a taste of how it feels to be a protagonist, and Lord Simeon and I resolved our misunderstanding and made up. We’ve resumed our engagement, and beyond that, I no longer need to keep my writing a secret from him. And beyond even THAT, I got to meet the three people I’ve been most longing to meet!

I prayed that this wasn’t a dream. That this night wouldn’t fade away like an

illusion.

While the Three Flowers and I swelled with joy at meeting our kindred spirits, the men's group stood at a distance and talked quietly.

"Simeon, I know it's rather late to be asking, but are you sure you want to marry...*all that*?"

"Yes, Your Highness," he replied after a moment's pause.

"Capital. As long as you're happy, I shan't raise any objections. Still..."

"Personally, I think it's an excellent match," said the ambassador. "Life with her will never be boring, you can be sure of that."

"With all due respect, Ambassador, I'm not sure it's any of your business..."

"A man and a woman need a certain degree of tension between them. It keeps things exciting. Life is long, so you should take the time to enjoy it."

"You do have a point," Lord Simeon replied awkwardly.

Two months later, Agnès Vivier's new bestseller was published, a tale of antagonism that blooms into romance, with a touch of intrigue for good measure. Its reception was rather positive, I must say. The Three Flowers of Tarentule thought it was fantastic as well.

"That's all well and good, but I have to ask about those two men. They seem awfully close to one another, don't they?"

Lord Simeon read the book as well, which made this release even more memorable. We sat beside each other as he asked me his questions.

"They're the male love interest's best friends," I replied. "Sorry, what's your question?"

"I understood that much. It's just that there seems to be a peculiar kind of...tension between them."

"Oh, that's for my best friend, and everyone else who secretly shares her predilection. I can't write about it too directly, you understand. This book is aimed at the average woman, so I mustn't lean into it too much. Just enough to

create the suggestion in the reader's mind."

"But if you could write about it directly, you would!?"

"Not personally, no, but such books do exist. I've just borrowed a new release from Julianne, in fact. Would you like to read it?"

I held up the book, but he refused it by way of burying his head in his hands. *I suppose a man's never going to be interested in that kind of book. Not unless they're actually that variety of man...*

"In any case, I wouldn't raise a fuss if it were just that you'd introduced those elements. It's the strange sense I have that I *recognize* the people you've depicted."

I chuckled. "Goodness, who could they be? I didn't give them black hair and blond hair, so it's a complete mystery."

"So they *are* based on us!? Why did you have to present us this way!?"

"How to explain it, exactly... It's a classic pairing, you could say. So much so that readers might even find it trite and uninventive. It's certainly not specific enough for them to guess who the inspiration was."

"I'm relieved to hear that," he said, glowering. "But those who know will still know. You absolutely must not write a sequel! Please, whatever you do!"

He put a hand around my waist, drew me into a tight embrace and held me close.

The distance between us seems to have shrunk lately, I thought. We never used to sit so close to one another. We'd always sit separately, facing each other from our separate chairs.

Reading all those stories aimed at women must have been quite an education for him, I decided. It made me glad that he wasn't letting our engagement stay as a mere political arrangement. He was putting in every effort to build a loving relationship with me.

I have to put in every effort as well. I'll strive to be a good wife, fully dedicated to my husband!

Without stopping my writing at all, of course!

The response to those two side characters had been greater than I imagined, and my editor was begging for a sequel. *Should I do it? It would make Julianne so happy, and it would be so enjoyable to write...*

I looked up at him, and his scowl softened. He returned my smile with one of his own. I rested my head on his broad shoulder.

Perhaps I should go back to Tarentule and have the ladies teach me the best techniques for getting what I want.

He brushed aside a few strands of my hair, then leaned in and kissed me. Still giddy, I started making plans in my head. I already knew tomorrow would be great fun.

I want every day to be great fun. I hope we'll live a happy life together—today, tomorrow, and beyond!

The Love Story of Marielle Clarac

Chapter One

What single topic of discussion is causing the biggest stir right now in the Kingdom of Lagrange?

That was easy to answer. “Why, the mysterious thief known only as Lutin!”

I spread out the collection of newspapers I’d purchased. Each of them had an impressive number of column inches dedicated to this enigmatic criminal, whom the common folk hailed as a hero and the nobility decried as an evildoer.

It had been a short while since all that unfortunate business with me breaking off my engagement. Things had calmed down, and Lord Simeon and I had made a fresh start as an engaged couple. We were getting on well, in our own way. Every day was great fun!

And on that particular day, we were going on an outing together. “Look,” I told him, “every single paper has produced a special report about him!” It was such a relief that I didn’t need to hide my interests from Lord Simeon anymore. I could feel free to talk to him about whatever I liked.

And what had piqued my interest lately was this master of thievery and trickery, Lutin. His fame wasn’t limited to Lagrange—even in the surrounding countries, I doubt there was a single person who hadn’t heard his name. His fame had reached international proportions.

The most recent victim was Baron Bachelet, who’d lost a ceremonial sword the month before last. “Lutin disguised himself as an art dealer,” I said, poring over the articles before me in the carriage, “and got close to the baron by bringing him genuine articles. He built up enough trust that the baron let him appraise his family’s collection. Then he walked out with the sword, which is said to have a market value so high, even a million algers would be too paltry a sum to buy it.” I exhaled. “One million algers... I think I’d have to write somewhere in the region of two hundred books to earn that much.”

As I tried to calculate my earnings, Lord Simeon, sitting beside me, wore a stunned expression. “Now you’re ‘fangirling’ over a common criminal, is that right? I don’t see what’s so fantastic about stealing other people’s property.”

The reproach in his voice distracted me from my mental mathematics. I looked up at him. *Oh, that cold glare of his is so wonderful! Why isn’t he holding a riding crop right now!? I wish he’d carry it around with him everywhere! It should be as much a part of his daily attire as his glasses!* “No,” I replied, “No, he doesn’t light my fangirl fire at all. As you say, there’s nothing admirable about robbery. I just think it’s an interesting subject. It’s raised such a furor that the papers are all printing special features full of speculation about when he’ll strike again. Everyone’s filled with trepidation thinking they might be next. It’s rather exciting, isn’t it?”

Lutin only targeted the wealthy and well-bred, and each time he employed a new, elaborate gambit. All of this raised him high in the estimation of the lower classes. The wording in the mass-market tabloids aimed at that audience frequently took on a tone of admiration. In all honesty, I did find myself getting swept up in the drama of it all. Who can hear the words “mysterious thief” and not feel their heart begin to pound?

But, while I’d have no qualms about enjoying it in a fictional story, I couldn’t bring myself to applaud real people’s suffering. Every noble house was on tenterhooks, wondering when they would be targeted.

My family would never be targeted, incidentally. I was quite sure of that. What would we have that would be worth his effort to steal? Even our estate was minuscule in the grand scheme of things. I sincerely doubted that Lutin even knew of our existence.

On the other hand... “Lord Simeon, your estate is full of precious jewels and works of art, isn’t it? He could come at any moment. Aren’t you concerned that you might be his next target?” In terms of size alone, House Flaubert’s estate was easily five times the size of House Clarac’s. It was entirely plausible that Lutin would set upon them next. I found Lord Simeon’s apathy a little puzzling.

“Indeed, we’ve told all the servants to be on their guard. However, vigilance against possible intruders is a fact of life for us. It’s not something unique to this

Lutin fellow, nor did it begin today or yesterday.”

“I know, but he’s far from an ordinary burglar.”

“He executes each theft with an unusual degree of skill, I’ll grant you. I have the impression he’s so devoted to fooling people with his clever tricks that he’d never take a crude approach like forcing his way in with violence. I’ve heard no report of him having caused anyone physical harm so far, in which case I’d say there’s no need for any excess concern. I’d be decidedly unimpressed if one or two items from our collection were stolen. It would be an unforgivable crime, but my house’s stability doesn’t depend on those one or two items. We’d survive.”

For him to talk so casually about this highlighted the differences in our birth and upbringing. *I suppose their treasures are something they treasure, but that’s all. They’re not something that puts food on the table. As he says, they could lose a few without much impact.*

But being robbed would surely, in and of itself, have quite an impact. A normal person couldn’t be so indifferent to the possibility that they expressed no fear whatsoever. Could they? *Does his estate really have that many valuables lying around? They must be swimming in them. That’s rich people, I suppose!*

I’d long since accepted this disparity between us, and I was sure we wouldn’t see eye to eye, so I continued without agreeing or disagreeing with him. “Apparently the police still don’t have anything resembling a lead. He’s been active for a while now. I wonder why they’ve been unable to arrest him.”

“Their means to do so are quite limited,” Lord Simeon replied. “They’ve tried to gather eyewitness statements, make a likeness of him, investigate whether any stolen goods have made their way to the black market, and so on. He’s always one step ahead, and all they can do is react. It’s far from easy.”

I nodded. “And eyewitness statements can only help so much when they’re dealing with a master of disguise. He looks like a different person every time... Oh, but what if they arranged for officers to stake out any estates that he’s likely to target?”

“Do you know how many noble houses there are in this country?” he said,

shaking his head. “If we include the wealthiest middle-class families as well, it’s far more than the police would be able to manage. There simply aren’t enough policemen for that.”

“Then wouldn’t it be worthwhile for the Order to combine their efforts with those of the police force?” I asked, putting down the newspaper in my hand and turning my whole body to face him. This was actually the main thing I’d wanted to say. “Has there been no kind of order from His Highness the Crown Prince related to this? If you took charge, capturing Lutin wouldn’t seem quite so impossible.”

I was definitely not on Lutin’s side. I hoped he would be arrested soon so that the number of victims wouldn’t increase any further.

And what I hoped most of all was that Lord Simeon would be the one to do it.

The Demon Vice Captain and the Master Thief in an epic showdown! Now THAT’S something I can fangirl over! Lord Simeon still has a lot to learn. A thief on his own doesn’t do it for me, but pit him against Lord Simeon, and suddenly my fire is ablaze!

I pictured the scene. A thief who’s committed countless crimes and repeatedly slipped through the police’s fingers...and along comes Lord Simeon, hunting him down with relentless coldness. Behind his glasses, his eyes glint with a brutal, almost villainous light. Lutin gnashes his teeth, humiliated, as Lord Simeon torments him.

Just my own delusion—I mean, imagination—was enough that it almost set off a violent nosebleed! *I’ll be standing by with a handkerchief, so please, make it happen!*

“I believe wholeheartedly that you’d be able to catch him!” I continued. I looked up at Lord Simeon, full of anticipation. “And, if there’s any way I can be of assistance, just let me know!” *Because I can turn it into an excellent novel, too!*

He sighed and rapped me lightly on the forehead. “If this is about research for your writing, find somewhere to do it that won’t put you in danger. Don’t go poking your nose into a criminal investigation.”

Rats. He'd seen straight through my ruse.

Not to be outdone, I replied with an innocent shrug. "But how could I ever be in danger if I'm with you, Lord Simeon?"

"Anyway," he said, "catching criminals is the police's job. The Royal Order of Knights acts as the royal guard. This isn't a matter for us at all."

"But you did say that the police are unlikely to manage it on their own."

"Nonetheless, we can't step on their toes. They have their jurisdiction, and we have ours."

"Even if an order came directly from His Highness?"

"He'd never give such an order unless it was an incident that directly involved the royal family. No one could give or accept an order that ignored the boundaries of the system, not even His Highness—and not even His Majesty the King himself. Such reckless abuse of authority would lead to a breakdown of law and order."

A cold and heartless answer, but with reasoning that was irritatingly sound.

Despite being called "knights" as per tradition, they no longer galloped into battle on horseback as in the days of yore. Nowadays, their duties were not so unlike those of the police. That's why I thought it wouldn't be such a stretch for them to work together on this one case...but evidently things weren't so simple. The modern era had also brought with it strict dividing lines between different parts of the system. Interfering in any matters outside of one's own domain was simply not allowed.

Of course, I knew all this already. It's not as if I'm a child. I understand that society has rules and you need to follow them. I simply thought His Highness, or His Majesty, might be anxious enough about the situation to give a special order, just this once. It seemed as though it might work!

Instead, I was left mourning the dying light of my fangirl hopes and dreams.

"But what if," I ventured, "Lutin were to target the royal family's treasures?"

My last stubborn gambit. Lord Simeon rolled his eyes. "Yes, then we'd be called into action. This would be if, and only if, the likes of this common criminal

were brave enough to try breaking into the palace of all places.”

Why wouldn't he be brave enough? That's why they're also calling him "Lutin the Mischievous Fairy," I thought to myself. *He craves the limelight so strongly that he goes out of his way to leave his signature at the scene of every crime he commits. He puts on an unnecessary show each time, just to surprise the public. He probably wants fame more than the goods themselves. Why wouldn't he keep upping the ante by going after the royal family's secret treasures?*

By the same token, if the action took place in the palace, I wouldn't be able to spy on the proceedings. If things went down that route, I'd also be quite unhappy.

“What if you just happened to encounter him yourself? Then jurisdiction wouldn't come into it, correct?”

“Indeed, it wouldn't, although that's quite a large 'if.' Anyway, let's not blather on about this all day. We've arrived.”

At his prompting, I looked through the window as our carriage entered the park. It was a mild late-autumn afternoon, and crowds of people had come to enjoy a relaxing day out. Stalls selling light refreshments lined the paths, the merchants' eyes hungry for the contents of the visitors' coin purses. Street performers filled the air with jaunty music.

In the center of the park, a vast circus tent had been erected. That was our destination. Young and old alike walked toward it, their eyes gleaming. The circus troupe's visit was another popular point of discussion in the city of Sans-Terre.

We were lucky enough—or rather, we had paid enough—to have ringside seats, giving us an incredible view. A variety of beasts performed impressive feats right before our very eyes.

I'd never seen a tiger at such close range before. It's gigantic! And its fur looks like velvet. Those legs are so thick and sturdy, and the claws at the ends of them look so dangerous... It's slightly terrifying that there's not even a fence between us. But it's still so cute, somehow. I want to squish my finger against its giant paw pads!

The bear riding a ball was adorable as well. Not to mention the ducks, who'd clearly been included as a crowd-pleaser. They wore little cravats, and they walked in procession, shaking their bottoms and going *quack, quack, quack*. They were so unbearably cute, it made me fangirl a little.

The human performers weren't about to let the animals outshine them. Some of their movements were practically inhuman, like the female contortionist who bent her body into alarming shapes, and the man who did tricks atop a terrifyingly high tightrope. Not to mention the trapeze artists, who swung from one trapeze to the next at a dizzying height. Or the people who could keep ten objects in the air at once, throwing and catching them without ever letting them drop to the floor. Not only that, but two and then three people doing it, all perfectly synchronized. I was so amazed by their superhuman feats that I hardly had time to breathe.

"Wow!" I exclaimed over and over, unable to contain my joy. "How many people are in that formation? I'm scared they'll all collapse!"

"I wouldn't worry, they're carefully balanced. They've practiced it over and over to ensure they don't collapse."

"You say that, but look! They've tumbled down! Oh no, I hope they're all right!"

"That was on purpose. It's all just to give the audience a fright. See, they're on their feet again."

For every exclamation I made about the program in front of me, Lord Simeon had an equally cold and rational answer. His tone was so serious and composed that I felt he was putting something of a damper on my enjoyment. *Does he really find the circus that boring?* I turned slightly to look at him, and to my surprise, I was struck by a tender smile. My heart missed a beat at the surprise attack.

It wasn't a black-hearted smile that hid a villainous streak underneath. That version of Lord Simeon was the one I cherished above all else, but the sight of him like this, with a pure, genuine smile on his face, sent a thrill straight through me as well.

Bewildered by this rush of excitement, which felt entirely different from

fangirling, I instinctively cast my eyes downward.

“Lord Simeon, do you find this boring?”

“No, not at all.”

“Oh! Really?”

He let a laugh slip out. It tickled my ears.

“Yes, I could watch this all day and never tire of it.”

I paused. *What does he mean by “this”? Watch WHAT all day and never tire of it?*

I reflected on my enthusiastic outbursts. They had been a bit childish, perhaps. I considered that I might have behaved somewhat improperly.

Embarrassed, I looked back at the ring and put all my focus on the show again. *I can't meet Lord Simeon's gaze, somehow. When he's the Demon Vice Captain I can gladly stare at him in full fangirl mode, but when he turns into Prince Charming, I don't know where to look.*

At that very moment, a new figure appeared in the ring. Someone very large indeed—taller even than Lord Simeon, who was himself rather tall. A cloak covered his entire body from neck to feet, but even through the fabric it was clear that he had a fine physique. The width of his shoulders matched what you'd expect, for example.

His exposed face, however, was as beautiful as a rose. Golden hair framed his face exquisitely, like an ancient statue. The face itself was finely chiseled as well. More than a few women in nearby seats raised swooning cries of admiration.

His beauty was of a different genre again than Lord Simeon and Prince Severin's. How to describe it? Intense, perhaps? Beauty is beauty, but his was not the kind that would make him an object of desire. His looks were the kind that you'd rather gaze at from a distance. I asked myself, *What is it that makes him so strangely alluring? Is it his lips? They're so exceptionally glossy. (Are they painted with something?) Or maybe it's his long eyelashes, almost like a doll's. (They don't appear to be stuck on...)*

This bewitching young man walked a slow circuit of the ring, then stood in the center and flung his cloak to the ground.

In that moment, a clamor erupted throughout the tent.

My mouth, too, fell open in astonishment. I stared, fixated. This one dramatic, boastful sweep of the hand had revealed a nearly naked male figure, only a small cloth covering his loins. He struck a ridiculously beautiful pose, showing the audience his muscled body. How can I describe it, but...strapping?

Not that “strapping” did him justice at all. I’d never seen muscles bulge like that before! His body was quite spectacular, with not the slightest trace of excess flesh. His physique was so burly, his muscles so hulking, that it almost appeared as if he was hewn of rock, or maybe forged of steel.

So beautiful from the neck up, but so muscular from the neck down...

I thought of ancient statues again. *Those did have finely hewn muscles as well! Only, they were always designed with careful balance in mind, to make sure the statue as a whole would be beautiful to look at. One that was all muscle like this would be a very odd-looking statue!*

But the disparity between head and body had a strangely alluring effect of its own. The man had a peculiar sort of beauty, one that sent a chill through all those watching, that made it hard to tear one’s eyes away, even with the strongest will in the world. It felt like he’d cast a spell on us all.

This shocking spectacle left me lightheaded. The bewilderment I’d felt a moment ago had been swept away in an instant. This unique type of beauty, this inscrutable spell I was under, occupied my entire consciousness.

Subconsciously, my trembling hand reached into my bag and grasped my notebook and pen. As I moved to pull them out, Lord Simeon’s hand shot out and held my arm in place.

“Halt. What do you intend on writing?”

“I need a record of that muscleman’s pose, of course! And not writing, drawing. You might not know it, but I have quite a talent for sketching.”

“Why do you feel compelled to draw a sketch of him!?”

“It will make excellent reference material! Haven’t I taught you anything? I can’t simply look at such a unique character once and then forget all about him. I must have reference material I can rely on in the future!”

“Quite, but...” He paused. “My concern is that he’s so very unique, if you use his likeness in your work without permission, it might not be viewed so favorably. I’m certain it would not, in fact. You’d be better off not to keep any record. For that matter, better not to keep him in your memory at all.”

I’d have gawked at Lord Simeon, but I couldn’t wrest my eyes from the bulging pectoral and abdominal muscles of the man in the ring. “Do you feel able to forget such a unique sight as this!?”

“From the very depths of my heart, I promise you, I hope and dream of forgetting it.”

“The very moment you make such a statement, it becomes quite impossible!”

A set of weights were brought to the man on a cart, and his bulging frame now held them aloft. A man who could lift one such weight would be common enough, and holding two might not be so unusual either. But the number increased to three, then four. *First he flaunted his menacing muscles*, I thought, *and now his menacingly superhuman strength*. “I’ll wager he could even lift a carriage without exerting himself at all.”

“The weights themselves are probably dummies, you know. I imagine they’re light as a feather and he’s just playacting that they’re heavy.” But Lord Simeon, too, adjusted his glasses and kept his gaze fixed on the ring.

As if to answer his doubts, the muscleman threw one of the weights. It landed with a heavy *thud* that shook the ground.

“Light as a feather, you say?”

“...I may have misjudged.”

The tumult of voices reacting in the audience persisted, a heady mixture of fear and fascination. Next he lifted people into the air, one on his left arm and one on his right. Then others climbed on those people, forming an ever-climbing display in the style of the acrobatics we’d witnessed earlier. The only difference was that this time, the base of the tower was but a single man, his

protruding muscles supporting everyone above him.

Ultimately, three acrobats rested on each arm, making for a total of six. *I wonder how much they weigh in total. Though it's right before my eyes, I can scarcely believe one man can bear so much!*

One by one, the acrobats leapt down with dramatic somersaults. Afterward, they all delivered a bow. The crowd erupted with wild cheering and rapturous applause.

I applauded as well, every bit as rapt as the others, while endeavoring to sear the image into my memory. *I doubt my writing skills can do him justice, but I must make every effort to capture this formidable image in words.* “How spectacular!” I said to Lord Simeon. “The world is full of such weird and wonderful people, and I had no idea! The woman who looked a bit like a jellyfish was quite a sight as well, but this man seemed almost inhuman! It wasn’t only his appearance that made a shocking impression!”

“Indeed, he was most impressive.” Even when agreeing with me, Lord Simeon’s voice remained cool.

Dissatisfied, I turned to look at him once more. “My word, Lord Simeon, how can you be so emotionless? How can you see that display of sheer power and skill—and muscle—and be so unmoved? This is something that’s meant to overwhelm you! Let yourself be overwhelmed!”

“This is the circus,” he replied. “I came here fully expecting to see feats that were outside the realm of normal human ability. Should I be overwhelmed by seeing what I expected?”

“But coming to the circus and reacting so coldly is such a waste! You’re supposed to be fully invested in the spectacle and enjoy it with surprise and wonderment!”

“I’m confident that you’ve enjoyed it with enough surprise and wonderment for both of us.”

“But two people’s surprise and wonderment should multiply into four!”

He frowned. “I’m not sure I follow your arithmetic.”

Though we were engrossed in this conversation, the sound of a quiet chuckle nearby drew us back to reality. Lord Simeon turned to look. A young man in the audience was laughing, while a woman next to him told him to stop in an urgent whisper.

“I’m sorry,” said the man, turning toward us. “You just seemed to be enjoying yourselves so much, I got caught up in it.” He had a young face, perhaps a year or two over twenty. His high-class attire painted him as one of the nobility, but I had no recollection of him.

However, Lord Simeon looked at the older lady sitting in the seat beyond and murmured his surprise. “I hadn’t realized it was you, Countess Pautrier. I must apologize for not saying anything sooner.”

She responded to his greeting with a polite nod. She was elderly, with a peaceful air about her. “Oh, pish posh. I hadn’t said a word to you either. I arrived late, you see, so I didn’t want to interrupt you and your companion.”

I knew her as well. It was Countess Simone of House Pautrier. At her advanced age, she rarely made appearances in society, but she was nonetheless renowned as the wife of Earl Pautrier, whose house rivaled House Flaubert in prominence. Amongst her inferiors, however, she was often a source of gossip for a different reason altogether.

She turned and offered a kind smile and nod of the head to me as well.

“Good day, Countess Pautrier,” I said in reply. “It’s a great pleasure to see you again after so long.”

“Good day to you, Marielle. I’m delighted to have been able to come here today with my grandson, even if it was quite unbecoming of someone my age!”

She hadn’t forgotten my name. Very kind of her, though she presumably only remembered it because I was with Lord Simeon. What struck me most of all was the complete lack of the acerbic sneer that was often seen on her face when she made appearances in society. Instead, she wore a buoyant smile, even if it did seem to embarrass her somewhat.

And only this young man can put such a smile on her face, I thought. I glanced at him again. His light brown hair was slightly on the long side, and the blue of

his eyes was as deep as the ocean. He possessed a refined air that immediately marked him out as one of good upbringing. *And such gentle features, so easy on the eyes... Nothing like that wall of muscle. The third type of male beauty I've seen today, in fact.* A calm young man, and readily identifiable as Countess Simone's grandson.

"I must express my apologies for not introducing myself either. My name is Cedric. I understand you are Miss Marielle, and..." He hesitated. "You'll have to excuse me, but might I ask your name? I've spent many years living abroad, you see."

Lord Simeon introduced himself in return. "Simeon Flaubert. A pleasure."

"You're familiar with House Flaubert, I'm sure," said Countess Simone, cutting in to explain in more detail. "This is Earl Flaubert's son and heir. He's the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, not to mention a close confidant of His Highness the Crown Prince. He's a highly esteemed individual."

A light touch of wonder appeared on Lord Cedric's face. "Goodness, I had no idea. Meeting you truly is an honor."

"The honor is all mine, I assure you. I've long been awaiting a chance to meet the future Earl Pautrier."

In the shadow of such perfect politeness from Lord Simeon, I frantically held back the curiosity that was welling up inside me. To think that one of the most talked-about figures in noble society, moreso even than Lutin, would happen to appear in front of me! I was grateful for my good fortune at such a chance encounter.

We watched the subsequent performance while enjoying a pleasant flow of conversation with Countess Simone and Lord Cedric. As always, I let myself blend into the background. As far as possible, I let Lord Simeon do all the talking, while I sat and observed Lord Cedric. I didn't stare openly, of course—such a thing would be unthinkable. I hid my burning curiosity behind a suitably courteous smile.

And yet, in a strange way, it seemed that Lord Cedric's eyes kept finding mine. In those brilliant blue eyes, I sensed a growing curiosity toward me.

By the time we left the tent, the sun had sunk considerably, and a chill wind was blowing. I hunched my shoulders and gathered up the collar of my overcoat. It seemed that winter had arrived at last. The trees lining the path looked cold and bare.

Soon I'll need to start wearing a scarf, I suppose. But the moment I had that thought, I found myself wrapped in something soft and warm. Lord Simeon had given me his silk shawl.

"Thank you," I said, "but I fear you must be cold as well."

"It's quite all right. This temperature isn't enough to bother me." His smile showed a very grown-up degree of forbearance. At this, my heart pounded in my chest once again. Though I'd been cold just a moment ago, I was feverishly hot all of a sudden, and I found it hard to look at Lord Simeon.

I'd been having this sort of reaction rather often lately. Where I'd previously taken Lord Simeon's behavior in high spirits, finding it wonderfully gallant, now it was frequently becoming too much for me, making me unable to control my emotions. Afraid, I did my utmost to take my attention away from the turmoil inside of me. I wanted to cling on to my reason—my ability to watch and analyze everything from a distance.

He was my ideal male archetype, the brutal, black-hearted military officer. Inside he may have been clumsily over-serious, but sometimes I still got a glimpse of that masterfully cunning individual—the skilled tactician who formed the very core of my fangirl yearnings.

And, I told myself, the man I'm marrying in a purely political alliance.

That was more than enough. I had no need for him to see me as anything else. As long as I could fangirl over him, I was satisfied.

As we walked on, I successfully calmed myself down. A river of other ladies and gentlemen flowed from the tent alongside us, toward the array of carriages that waited in the same area as ours.

In deference to her age, we accompanied Countess Simone to her carriage and saw her off, rather than returning to ours straight away.

"I wish you a safe journey," said Lord Simeon.

“Thank you, I bid you the same,” she replied. “And you must bring Marielle to our party next week.”

That party does ring a bell, I thought. Were we planning to go?

Lord Simeon smiled and gave a nod of assent. “Of course, we’ll attend with the utmost joy.”

“Naturally, we’ll be glad to see your parents there as well, but as this will be my grandson’s formal debut into society, I’d like to introduce him to as many people in his own age range as possible. My husband and I make only rare appearances at social gatherings, as you know, so it’s rather a challenge for us. With the future in mind, it would be a shame for him not to start forging connections sooner rather than later. I realize it’s quite bold of me to ask, but if you could help at all in this regard, I would be most appreciative.”

Indeed, his time spent living abroad meant Lord Cedric had not a single acquaintance amongst the nobility of Lagrange. Nor, in fact, did anyone know his face. This was, of course, quite an uneasy state of affairs for the future heir to an earldom, so Countess Simone’s anxiety was more than reasonable. Even if the current earl and countess lent him their support, forging connections amongst the younger generation would be a challenge, as the two of them had largely retired from society due to their age.

Given that we’d only met Lord Cedric now for the first time, and only by chance, it was indeed a touch forward of her to ask us to help him. However, she’d expressed her worries about her grandson, and her desire to secure his position in society however possible, in such frank terms that it would be difficult to refuse. Besides, a close relationship with the soon-to-be Earl Pautrier would be highly beneficial for us as well.

To put it bluntly, agreeing would put House Pautrier in our debt, so refusing would have been madness. “I’ll do anything I can to help. I’m sure quite a number of my friends will be present as well, and I can introduce them to Lord Cedric.”

“That would be marvelous. I am exceedingly grateful to you, and shall look forward to seeing you there!” Countess Simone was apparently in such joy, she was moved to tears. *When one reaches her age, it must not take much to have a*

big emotional impact, I mused.

She thanked Lord Simeon several times, and told me she was grateful for my help as well. *Well, I can't provide any useful contacts, but I do have heaps of information that might be useful. I'll try to help in that way instead!*

She climbed into the carriage, but Lord Cedric stayed outside. He asked his grandmother if she'd wait a moment, then closed the door.

He turned back to face us. "I must apologize as well for asking this of you. I realize it's quite impudent to ask such a favor the very first time we meet. However, as my grandmother said, I have absolutely nobody in this country. If the two of you can assist with that even slightly, it would be an immense relief."

"You've been living in Linden, is that right?" asked Lord Simeon. "It may be a foreign country in the strictest sense, but it's not far away and the culture is rather similar. I'm sure as soon as you get to know a few people here, you'll fit right in."

"You're probably right," he said, doubt lingering in his voice. Despite having a firm promise that he'd receive the help he'd asked for, Lord Cedric still looked decidedly uneasy.

Lord Simeon cocked his head expectantly, sensing that there was more to be said here. After a few more moments of hesitation, Lord Cedric steeled his nerve and spoke again.

"I have another request. There's something I'd like you to help me with in your role as Vice Captain of the royal guard. As soon as I learned who you were, I realized how much I could use your assistance."

Lord Simeon paused for a second, then asked coolly, "You need assistance from the Royal Order of Knights?"

His facial expression didn't change, but *I knew. He's switched into Demon Vice Captain mode! He's watching Lord Cedric with his steely gaze. I love it when he has that look in his eyes! It's the absolute best!*

On the inside, I had secretly reached the stage where my breathing was heavy and labored. Suddenly, he rapped me on the forehead.

Not so secret after all. *How did he know without even turning around!? Does he have a sixth sense for my fangirling!? If so, that in itself is quite wonderful!*

Watching our silent back and forth with some perplexity, Lord Cedric answered, his voice wavering with every word, “I wouldn’t put it that way, exactly. However, I would say I have a problem that ordinary people might struggle to solve.”

He glanced furtively at the carriage, then lowered his voice to a whisper. “I have reason to believe I’m in danger. I don’t want to worry my grandparents, so I haven’t been sure who I could turn to. I admit that it’s very presumptuous of me indeed, but if there’s any way I might be able to beg your assistance, I would be eternally grateful. Pitiful though it may be, I’m thoroughly inexperienced when it comes to the realm of physical altercations. If I were forced to defend my life, I’d have neither the means nor the knowledge of how to do so. I have no choice but to put my faith in another.”

“And this problem, is it one you brought with you from Linden?” Because if so, you ought to tell the police—that’s what Lord Simeon’s inner voice was saying, I sensed. If he’d done something unfortunate in Linden and was now finding it difficult to make the whole thing go away, I was sure that Lord Simeon had no intention of taking on his burden.

But Lord Cedric shook his head. “It began only after I came here. As you’re no doubt aware, the loss of my house’s heirs left me as the only direct descendent, and I was welcomed back as such. Certainly, my grandmother and grandfather have accepted me as the heir, but amongst my relatives, not everyone seems quite so receptive to the idea.”

“I see,” Lord Simeon murmured. I nodded internally as well. *A family quarrel, then.* “Based on what you’ve said, you could discuss it with Earl Pautrier openly, could you not?”

“I considered that as well, but his age has left him very prone to bouts of ill health. I fear the shock of this may be too much for him. I have the same worry with regard to my grandmother, as well. If there’s any way to avoid it, I’d much prefer not to involve them. In any case, I suspect it might be counterproductive for my grandfather to leap to my defense. I have no desire to make a big song

and dance about this. I'd only like to pinpoint whoever's responsible and make them promise never to engage in such foolish behavior ever again."

Foolish behavior? Interesting. I wondered what exactly had happened. If someone connected to the family's succession crisis was behaving maliciously, there'd no doubt be a heavy scent of danger in the air. In a story, this would be a very familiar plot development. *Is Lord Cedric saying that his life has been threatened, perhaps?*

I looked up at Lord Simeon's face. He appeared to be quite disgruntled, and very reluctant to get involved in all this. Before he could open his mouth to refuse, I stepped forward without a second's hesitation and said, "I'm unsure to what extent we'll be able to help you, but if you believe we can be of use to you, we'll gladly combine our efforts with yours. House Pautrier having a clear line of succession is not only a personal matter, but one that has an effect on society as a whole. If a prominent house with a long pedigree fell into ruin, it wouldn't be good for the country. Furthermore, we mustn't turn a blind eye to a friend in need, especially one we've only just met. Don't you agree, Lord Simeon?"

He returned my beaming smile with an intense, full-force smile of his own. I chuckled inside. *Don't think you can beat me! When you make that face, Vice Captain, it's like catnip to me. It's the source of all my fangirl desires. It's a reward, not a punishment.*

Go on! Glare at me more! Make it truly glacial!

Our smiles faced off against one another in silence for a moment. Then he sighed and looked away. *I won!* I thought, clenching my metaphorical fist.

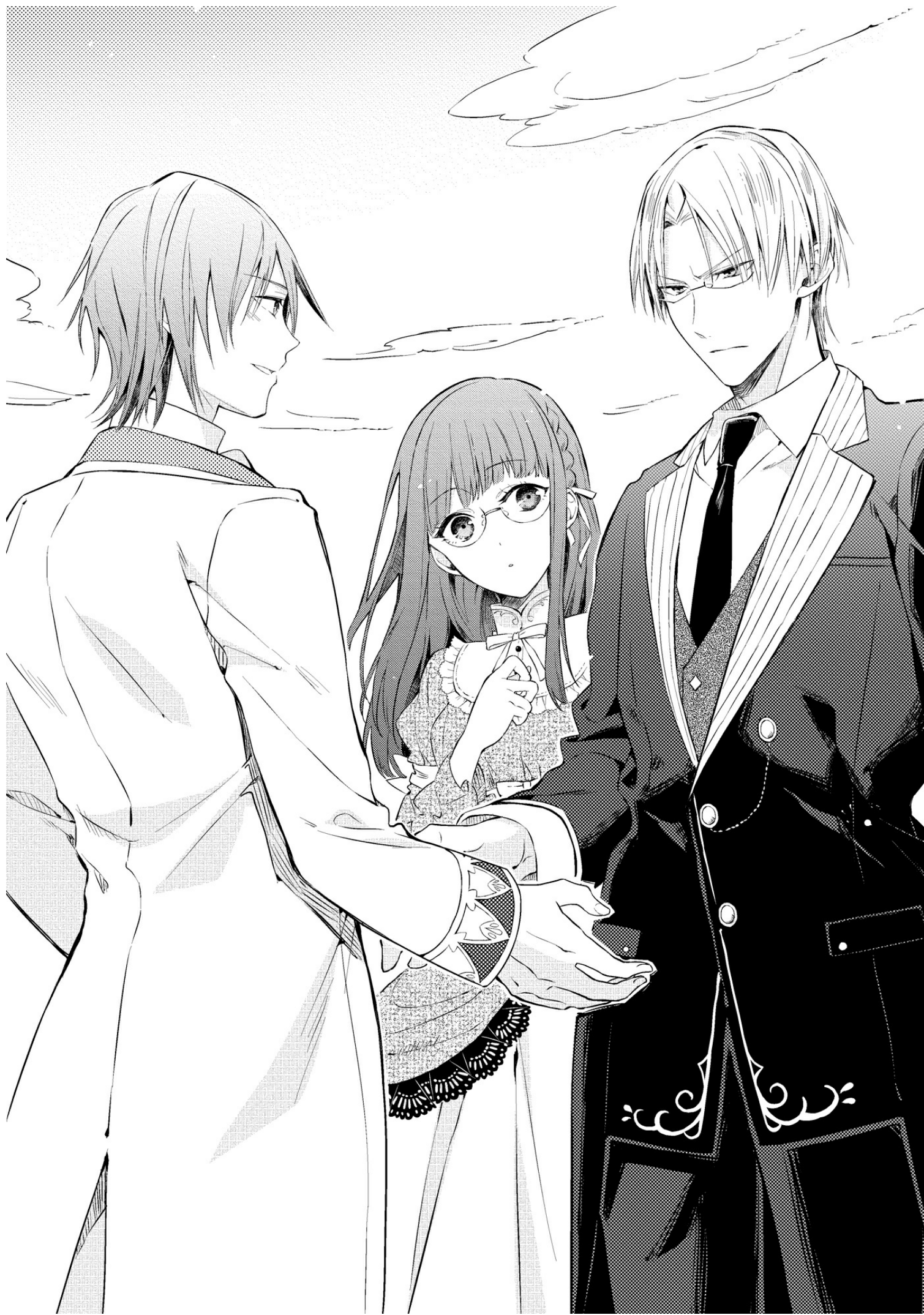
"Thank you! Oh, thank you! If you'll grant me your aid, it's more deeply reassuring than you can possibly know!" With a very emotional demeanor, Lord Cedric took my hand. Refined young noble or otherwise, he was still a man, with big, strong hands to match. His hands surrounded mine and swallowed them whole. "Though I truly am sorry to be making such an ill-mannered request of you."

"You needn't worry! Let's think of it as helping one another. Let's work together to try and solve your problem, not only for the sake of House

Pautrier's future, but to ensure that our future is enjoyable as well!"

"Thank you, Miss Marielle," he replied.

Lord Simeon cleared his throat. With a touch of aggression, he contributed, "Yes, indeed." Then he stepped forward, brushed me aside and presented his outstretched hand to Lord Cedric. "As the heirs of our respective houses, we'll be acquainted for a long time to come. Let's start off on the right foot and try to help one another."



“Thank you!” he exclaimed, and the two of them shared a firm handshake.

Behind them, the carriage window opened. Evidently Countess Simone had started to wonder why he was taking so long to join her.

In a hurried whisper, Lord Cedric said, “I’ll share the details in a letter. I mustn’t let my grandmother suspect anything, so for the time being, I’ll have to bid you good day.”

We all said our goodbyes, and Lord Cedric got into the carriage. We stood and watched them leave. “Friends, you say?” Lord Simeon asked at last, his gaze still fixed on the carriage as it disappeared into the distance.

“Of course we’re friends,” I replied, keeping my eyes forward as well.

“You certainly make friends quickly. We’d never seen him before today.”

“Exactly. So today, we became friends.”

His voice grew as icy cold as the wind that tormented us. I wondered if my trembling was due to fear or excitement. *Both, probably! If he really got angry with me it would be pretty scary,* I considered, *but up to a certain limit, the tension makes me shiver with excitement.*

“And what exactly did you mean by ‘our future’? Whose future will be ‘enjoyable’?”

“Mine and my readers, of course.”

While this may have been a fairly common story premise, having a chance to experience these events in real life, with a close-up view of the people involved, was far from an everyday occurrence. A sordid tale of a family fighting amongst themselves for their own selfish gain! I could hardly pass up that opportunity. I’d be able to gather all the reference material I needed to depict this kind of story with painstaking realism. It was simply too delicious to miss.

“As I thought.” He sighed the deepest of sighs and turned to face me.

“Marielle,” he began.

I preempted the inevitable lecture. “I think it’s perfectly fine. We help him, and it helps us in return. Mutual benefit for both parties. What, might I ask, is wrong with that?”

“As of now, we have no knowledge of the circumstances. It’s not a decision to take lightly, simply accepting his word without question.”

“If he turns out to have been lying, that’s quite all right with me. I’m merely excited to see how the plot thickens. Aren’t you?”

“This is not a game, you realize. If he is telling the truth, it makes for a sizable element of danger. You’re still not concerned?”

I feigned a sigh of disappointment. “Should I understand that you don’t intend to help poor Lord Cedric, in that case? It will mean going back on your word.”

“I... You...”

“And indeed, it’s only with you by my side that I’d feel safe taking on this duty. It’s with that in mind that I agreed to his request. Perhaps you don’t feel confident that you’ll succeed? I’d find that quite odd, since the perpetrator is likely to be a normal person, not even a fiendish criminal.” I flashed him a smile that said: *The royal guard’s most devilish intellect couldn’t possibly be that cowardly...could he?*

With another sigh, he threw up his hands in defeat. “I did promise I’d help, yes, against my better judgment, so for now I’ll follow and see where things lead. But I must insist that you not involve yourself, Marielle. You may attend the party, but that’s all.”

“No.”

Though he’d presented it as an order, I flatly refused without letting my smile drop. How could I possibly gather all the inspiration I needed if I couldn’t be present for any of the action?

A vein throbbed in his temple. “Does he provide you with such a great sense of intrigue?”

“Intrigue? Why, there’s more here than I could ever hope for. He’s the ‘fortunate heir to the unfortunate earldom,’ as society has deemed him. What could be more intriguing than that?”

House Pautrier’s line of succession, and the troubles associated with it, had been a rather frequent source of gossip in social circles. The earl’s eldest son

was the original intended heir, as you'd expect. However, he sadly fell ill and died before he could sire any offspring.

This had occurred roughly half a year ago. After that, the earl decided he would ask his second son, who lived abroad, to return home. Only then did he discover the terrible truth: the second son and his wife had already died two years earlier. A vicious strain of influenza had swept through Linden, leaving many dead in its wake. Upon realizing that both their sons had passed away, the earl and countess were stricken with grief. It was such a sad story, one couldn't help but feel sorry for them.

However, the second son and his wife had borne a single child. He'd lived through the calamitous outbreak and was now twenty-three years old. That was Lord Cedric. Unsurprisingly, he was asked to come and take his place as heir.

Lord Cedric had arrived in Lagrange a mere month ago. He'd been a spark for gossip and rumormongering ever since. For someone who'd lived as a commoner to suddenly become the heir to one of the most distinguished noble families in the kingdom was unheard of, and had turned many heads in high society.

"Well-informed as always, I see." He spoke with a hesitant tone of voice, somewhere between admiration and astonishment. "I suppose you're also familiar with the fact that Cedric's father eloped?"

"Naturally," I replied. "The earl wouldn't permit him to marry his working-class lover, correct? But since he was the second son, and believed he'd inherit neither the house nor any great fortune regardless, he discarded his noble heritage without a second thought and chose the path of love. How wonderful!"

It was truly like something out of a story. Even if he was the second son, it couldn't have been easy to cut all ties to his family and embrace a new life as a commoner. Doing such a thing requires the ability to not only make a difficult decision, but act on it as well. I found it quite admirable that Lord Cedric's father succeeded. The earl had revoked the disinheritance ten years ago, hoping to one day meet his grandson. If he'd decided to, Lord Cedric's father could have returned to Lagrange and resumed his life as a noble at any point

since then. However, he chose to stay in Linden. Apparently he said that he was the one who'd discarded his house and his duty, and he had to take responsibility for that. It wouldn't do for him to suddenly go back after all these years, as if nothing had happened.

So it really is possible for love to bridge class divides, and be so strong that you'd stake your entire life on it. He must have been a very strong-willed individual, and very true to himself. It's such a shame for someone so upstanding to have died so young. I wish I'd had a chance to meet him during his lifetime.

I felt sure that Countess Simone's request was tied in significantly with all this as well. It wasn't only that Lord Cedric needed to forge connections. There were also a great deal of people in high society who had a very dim view of an heir who was of common birth. It would be tough indeed for him to find his place in such a society—and who knew how long Earl and Countess Pautrier would be around to support him in doing so? No doubt they were very determined to help him find allies as soon as possible.

The circumstances made it very easy to find sympathy, and as a story, it stirred up plenty of interest in me as well. If I could help someone while profiting from it personally at the same time, what on earth was the harm in that?

"Just to let you know, I won't step back from this, regardless of what you say. So, if you hear anything from Lord Cedric, tell me right away, all right? Don't try to hide anything. Otherwise, I'll write you into my next book as someone who dances at the other end of the ballroom, if you know what I mean."

"Am I to take that as a threat? You've already done that, haven't you?"

"Oh, not at all. I laid hints, certainly. The most subtle of hints. Next time, I'll leave *nothing* to the imagination."

"...Anyway," he said after a pause, "I think it's time to go home. If we stand out here forever, we'll catch a cold. Oh, but first you need to wash your hands."

"Are they dirty?" I asked.

"Every part of you is dirty. Look, there's a fountain. Go and wash your hands."

He led me by the arm to the fountain. I looked at my hands, turning them to examine both sides.

“They don’t look dirty to me.”

“They’re thoroughly contaminated. If you don’t wash yourself right away, it could be disastrous.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Are you suggesting that my imagination is what’s dirty? I won’t deny it, but you must know that nothing will wash that away. Certainly not a fountain.”

“Blast, I was so hoping you’d deny it. And you’re certain it won’t wash off?”

“Not for as long as I live.”

Lord Simeon pressed on his forehead, a grave expression on his face. *Sorry about that. If you take my wild imagination away from me, there’d be nothing left. It’s the lifeblood of my creativity...and my life. It’s quite important!*

But, since I did feel ever so slightly sorry that I’d forced Lord Simeon to take part in my research gathering, I obediently did what I was told and washed my hands. The fountain water was extremely cold, and had a questionable odor.

I rubbed my hands together for warmth, thinking, *I’m fairly sure I just made them dirtier.* Lord Simeon thankfully put his hands around mine. I felt snug, comfortable in his warm grasp, though a thrill of embarrassment ran through me as well.

In stark contrast to his dashing handsome face, his hands were rough and calloused from years of training in military arts and horsemanship. When Lord Cedric had held my hands in his, the sensation had been similar. *If he’s spent his whole life living as a commoner, does that mean he’s never had any servants to help him? He might have even had to do physical labor to support himself. Of course his hands wouldn’t be like those of a young nobleman.*

I wondered, though, if it meant that his refined bearing could be credited entirely to his lineage. He must have inherited his high-class manner from his father, I decided. His way of speaking was very proper as well, and his well-composed facial features made him sweet and pleasant to look at. All the elements were there for the young ladies of society to find him completely

beguiling. *I'm sure his status in society is assured. All we need to do is get rid of this menacing shadow that hangs over him.*

I decided then and there: *I'll base the love interest in my next book on Lord Cedric!*

I spent the carriage ride working and reworking the concept for my new story. Lord Simeon seemed to be in a sullen mood and hardly entertained my attempts at discussing it at all.

Chapter Two

Five days after our circus jaunt, I was once again being swayed to and fro in a carriage alongside Lord Simeon. This time our destination was rather close by. *It can't be long now until it's visible on the horizon.*

House Pautrier's party was still a handful of days away, but it had been agreed that we would arrive early and stay there as guests until the party. Relatives, and any guests who had traveled a long way to get there, had already arrived and were staying at the estate, where an informal gathering of sorts would be taking place leading up to the party itself. It had been arranged that we would blend in as part of this gathering.

A letter from Lord Cedric had arrived at Lord Simeon's residence soon after our first encounter at the circus. It included a further explanation of the circumstances and an invitation to come and stay. He'd gained Earl and Countess Pautrier's approval without much difficulty, feeding them an excuse about getting to know us better before the real party.

"There's no need for your attendance, you know," said Lord Simeon, grimacing.

I'd forced him to accept it, and he still wasn't quite accepting enough. "Oh, but it's entirely necessary. How could I stay behind, after I listened with such concern to Lord Cedric's story, and promised him that I'd help? The excuse he gave his grandparents will also seem more natural if we attend as a couple. I'm sure that was his intention—it's certainly what his letter suggested."

"He was being polite. A proper gentleman would always seek to keep a lady away from a potentially dangerous situation. If he did expect you to come, then his cowardice truly knows no bounds." His tone was so scathing, I drew back slightly.

"You seem to be quite hostile toward Lord Cedric. What is it that you find so offputting about him? Is it that he was raised as a commoner?"

“That doesn’t have an impact on my opinion at all. I judge people purely based on their own words and actions.”

“In that case, I don’t recall anything in his behavior that would invite such harsh criticism.”

“Have you quite forgotten? As of yet, we have no proof that anything he said was true.”

“No, but nor do we have any reason to assume he was lying.”

Lord Simeon sighed and shook his head. Frustrated, I looked away from him and out the window instead.

I asked myself, *Why is he so eager to shut me out this time? Normally he’s quite content for me to do whatever I please, but this incident with Lord Cedric has put him in a foul mood. It might not even be so dangerous. All he said was “potentially dangerous.” It’s not as if I’m the one being targeted here.*

And, since other people were staying at the estate as well, it seemed unlikely that anything too terrible would happen. I wished that Lord Simeon would stop worrying over nothing. I wasn’t aware of any bad blood between House Flaubert and House Pautrier either, so I really couldn’t grasp the reason he was so agitated. *What is it that makes this specific situation so irritating to him?*

While I turned all of this over and over in my mind, the carriage arrived at House Pautrier’s estate. By the time we’d made it through the vast grounds to the front entrance, Lord Cedric had already appeared to greet us.

“I’m so glad to see you,” he said, full of both gratitude and joy, as we stepped out of the carriage. “I must thank you again for agreeing to my request, inappropriate though it was.” His sincerity was palpable. How someone so gracious and sincere could be deemed to have “cowardice that knows no bounds,” I did not know. It seemed completely over the top. It also seemed out of character for Lord Simeon, who was supposed to hide his black-hearted villainy beneath a cool exterior, to be so openly negative.

“Good day, Lord Cedric. Thank you for being so kind as to let us presume upon your hospitality.” A few servants were visible nearby, so I did my best to reply in a manner that suggested I was here for purely social purposes.

“Thank you most kindly for the invitation,” said Lord Simeon, expertly hiding every trace of his bad mood. “I hope we won’t be causing you too much bother. You must be busy readying everything for the party.” *Aha!* The cool facade had returned. The black-hearted depths were there, but his handsome face showed nothing of what was under the surface.

I love it so much when you’re like that, Lord Simeon!

“Not at all, not at all. I’m pleased to have you here. My grandparents are overjoyed that I’ve already made some friends. They’re inside, so why don’t you come in and greet them?”

We left our luggage in the servants’ hands and followed Lord Cedric inside. Being just as prominent as House Flaubert, their residence was just as impressive as well. Every inch of it overflowed with style and personality. My own house’s modest decor was nothing in comparison.

The key difference compared to House Flaubert, however, was the traditional atmosphere that permeated every room. The whole building was furnished in a refined and understated manner, with an old-fashioned ambiance. It perhaps reflected that its owners had reached an age where they didn’t often visit new places and see new styles.

Though I often visited other houses for balls and garden parties, it was rare that I had the chance to set foot in their living quarters. While taking great care not to look like an ill-mannered busybody, I tried to look around and take in every detail of the estate and etch it into my memory. *This experience will be very useful to me. If I can’t depict the surroundings properly, I won’t be able to convey the full atmosphere of the story to my readers.* And that atmosphere could be best described as “stately.” I wouldn’t have described it as simple, but it certainly wasn’t ostentatious—there were no valuable works of art on display, for example. If anything, you could say that the manor itself was a priceless antique.

House Pautrier had apparently amassed its vast fortune by avoiding reckless spending. Now all of this—the estate and the fortune—was to be inherited by Lord Cedric. I could understand why the rest of the family would be less than thrilled. If he’d grown up here and been raised as the heir all his life it might be

a different story, but he'd only just turned up.

We reached the drawing room, where the earl and countess met us in high spirits. They had a long and friendly relationship with Lord Simeon already, so they exchanged some warm words.

The earl remained seated, as his legs were not as reliable as they had been. "We heard the news of your engagement, but our age prevents us from getting out and about, you see. At last, we have the chance to meet your dear fiancée. My, to think that the little lad we know is old enough to be engaged already. How time flies!"

He'd come across as much more well and able the last time I'd seen him, but in a few short years he appeared to have aged more than ten. *Perhaps all this terrible misfortune surrounding the succession has worn him out*, I thought. At the very least, his face was cheerful and bright—calmed, maybe, by Lord Cedric's recent arrival.

Lord Simeon responded to being called a "little lad" with a bitter smile. *Even the Demon Vice Captain can't win against someone so senior, I suppose!*

"Little lad, indeed! I must apologize for my husband's rudeness. You're a fully fledged member of the Royal Order of Knights, and nothing less." Countess Simone wore a warm expression, too, much like the other day, as if all she thought of anymore was her grandson.

Lord Simeon seemed somewhat uncomfortable. *It must be quite awkward for him to be treated as "Simeon, that little lad we know from House Flaubert" when he's used to being the Vice Captain, mercilessly working his men to the bone*. I wished I could show his men the face he was making at that moment. This lesser-spotted version of Lord Simeon was so cute, I could die.

Lord Simeon gave me a watchful sideways glance. Somehow he'd sensed something, even though I did my best to hold in my shameless grin and feign a prim and proper smile instead.

I laughed inside. He was blushing. *Don't think I haven't noticed!*

The earl and countess didn't give the kind of mystified reaction I was used to. Not a hint of the puzzled face that everyone else presented in the first moment

they saw me. Perhaps at their age, my plain appearance didn't seem to matter so much.

Instead, they treated me as a normal person right from the start, and asked me several questions about what the youth of today were interested in, clearly for Lord Cedric's benefit. I enjoyed a congenial conversation while sipping a cup of tea.

Then, suddenly, a rather livelier group turned up.

"Ah, I see more guests have arrived," said a young lady who'd broken away from the rest of her group and rushed into the drawing room in advance. "I hope you don't mind if we introduce ourselves."

She looked roughly the same age as me. I imagined she was not yet twenty. Her hair was strawberry blonde, and she was, on the whole, quite attractive. The young lady that followed behind her looked so similar that it was easy to guess they were sisters.

A man, slightly older than Lord Simeon, brushed past them. "This is a surprise," he said. "Lord Simeon of House Flaubert, isn't it? Why exactly are you here?" He had curly, dark brown hair and freckled cheeks.

He must be the earl's nephew. What was his name again? I tried to recall the name that went with the face, but I came up short. The young ladies' names didn't spring to mind either. *For me to struggle with their names, they can't be making regular appearances in society.*

The earl's expression changed in an instant. His eyes shot daggers at the new arrivals. "How dare you barge in here when you weren't summoned. You're being very rude to our guests."

The three of them flinched slightly at being scolded, but they weren't deterred and came closer anyway.

"I realize we've been quite forward," said one of the sisters, "but it would seem equally rude not to introduce ourselves to guests who are so intimately familiar that they'll be staying here with us."

"I'd hate to think they were staying under the same roof, but didn't even know our faces," said the other. They both had their eyes fixed firmly on Lord

Simeon. The glimmer in their eyes was a familiar sight. Lord Simeon stayed seated and kept his smile placid, letting their lurid gazes wash over him.

“Won’t you introduce them to us, Great Aunt?” begged one of the sisters in a voice as sweet as honey.

Countess Simone sighed in irritation. “I can only apologize for their deficient manners. These are my sister’s granddaughters. We’ve taken them on here in an attempt to teach them proper decorum. The older sister is Evelyne, and the younger is Suzette.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” said the older of the two, taking her gorgeous dress into her hands and bobbing a cute curtsy. “I’m Evelyne of House Le Comte.”

“And I’m Suzette,” said the other, doing the same. “It’s an honor.”

I racked my brain. *Le Comte, Le Comte... Countess Simone’s original house, I think. The name only vaguely rings a bell, though.* As I recalled, the family didn’t have any noble rank, but their land was relatively vast.

“And this is Patrice,” Countess Simone continued. “The son of my husband’s brother.”

Aha! That was his name! Lord Patrice of House Bernier! I remember now. His reputation wasn’t exactly positive. He hadn’t shown his face in high society lately, but here he looked surprisingly upbeat. Perhaps he’d finally managed to put his affairs in order.

While exchanging introductions, one mustn’t stay sitting the entire time. I stood and returned their greetings with a curtsy of my own. Their attention strayed toward me for the briefest of moments before they lost all interest again.

The target of their attention was most definitely Lord Simeon. After all, he was practically a celebrity—everyone knew his name—and to top it off, he was just so dashing handsome. He stood to deliver a graceful bow, and the sisters’ cheeks flushed as they stared at him, enchanted.

“I hadn’t expected to see you here,” said Lord Patrice, offering his hand for a handshake in such a relaxed, friendly manner, you’d mistake them for lifelong

acquaintances. “Did you come to visit my uncle? To wish him a speedy recovery, I assume?”

I hadn’t thought them to be that close. But Lord Simeon gave him only the briefest of handshakes before letting go almost immediately.

“That’s one reason, yes. But in fact, we received an invitation from Lord Cedric.”

Lord Patrice looked at Lord Cedric, who’d stood up as well, with quite some surprise on his face. Their eyes met, and the half-smile that then formed on Lord Patrice’s face did not look amicable in the slightest. “You certainly move quickly. When did you have a chance to get close to him? How very like a commoner, nestling up to the powerful and influential and trying to benefit from their protection. It must be what you all see as the secret to success.”

My word, he’s being very frank considering the earl is right in front of him!

Lord Cedric replied with only an awkward laugh, but the earl’s face grew thunderous. “Patrice, if you came here purely to spout such foolish drivel, then get out, right now.”

But despite the verbal blow he’d just received, Lord Patrice did not falter for a moment. “Uncle, I’ve said this a thousand times, but House Pautrier has a proud lineage, and its successor should be chosen very carefully. He may be a blood relative, but we’ve never met him before. We don’t know how far we can trust him. It was practically yesterday that he was living amongst the lower classes! He can hardly become a nobleman overnight. It’ll only lead to misfortune for him, as well. I wouldn’t object to sharing some of your fortune with him, but giving him the earldom as a whole seems absurd.”

“I don’t recall asking for your opinion,” the earl replied through gritted teeth. “The decision is mine. Now, be silent.”

The flat refusal left Lord Patrice visibly stunned.

Interesting. Very interesting! He’s not shy about his opinions at all. He speaks his mind openly, even to the earl. His background didn’t especially warrant such confidence. His father was the earl’s youngest brother, and the two brothers were even born of different mothers. Lord Patrice’s father had then become a

baron by way of marriage into another house, but his position was not especially prominent in relation to either his original house or his new one.

Despite this, his son, Lord Patrice, showed not a hint of restraint or timidity. He seemed to feel he had an inherent right to talk about this house's succession crisis purely by virtue of being related. *Which probably has less to do with his position and more to do with his character.*

Lord Patrice and the young ladies' intrusion had soured the friendly atmosphere of the room, so our tea party was brought to a close, and Lord Simeon and I were led to the guest bedrooms by a servant.

Despite being engaged, we were still, of course, put into different rooms. We were neighbors, but separated for the time being.

Safe in my room, my first priority was to write down everything I'd just seen in my notebook. *Incredible that the atmosphere got so frosty so soon after we arrived! It's a real-life family feud.* All my relatives were quite easygoing, so the atmosphere at family gatherings had never been anything like that. This meant I was never very good at depicting realistic arguments between family members. I was glad to have gained some reliable reference material.

I pictured the facial expressions of each person who'd been in the room and jotted down every fine detail. After only a short amount of time, I'd already found plenty to sink my teeth into.

As I was writing, a knock came at the door. I stayed in my chair and called for the visitor to come in, assuming it was Lord Simeon. However, the one who entered was, in fact, Lord Cedric.

"Oh, good evening." I immediately closed my notebook and stood.

"I don't mean to intrude. I just feel a pressing need to apologize most profusely for all that unpleasantness." He hung his head sheepishly. "I'm sure that experiencing that, especially so soon after your arrival, must have left quite an unpleasant taste in your mouth. I am deeply, deeply sorry."

He was so consistently polite, it was a little difficult to believe that he had been raised as a commoner. If one wanted to be unkind, it could be said that he had an excessive tendency toward self-deprecation. However, I didn't sense any

negative undercurrents. He was self-deprecating, but not servile. As far as I could tell, his words were a sincere expression of his feelings, nothing more.

“No need to give it another thought,” I replied. “Nor are you the one who needs to apologize. Lord Patrice is the one who disturbed the peaceful time we were having.”

“Yes...but if I weren’t here, none of this would be happening. That much is true.” He smiled bitterly, an air of loneliness about him. He in no way resembled the “fortunate heir” the gossip had painted him as.

Apart from his grandparents, no one here was glad when he turned up. He’s already lost his parents, and he has no siblings at all. Now he’s come to a strange place, and received a frosty reception from most of his relatives. Of course he’d be lonely.

Even if he was the heir to a prestigious house, it was hard to think of him as someone that fortune had smiled upon. When I looked at him, I felt very sorry for him.

“Please feel free to sit down,” I told him. “There was something I’d hoped to ask you, so your visit is quite fortuitous.”

I presented a seat to him, and sat down myself, casually tidying away the notebook as if it was nothing. We sat across from each other at a table that was actually meant for drinking tea.

“You wrote in your letter that you’d received threats telling you to renounce your position as heir.”

His voice wavered. “Yes.”

The letter he’d sent included a basic outline. Someone had been repeatedly harassing him by sending threatening notes. Scraps of paper with writing on them had been appearing around him, and writing had even been scrawled across his bedroom walls.

The words were the same every time: “GET OUT.”

“The ones who’d be most readily able to carry out a plan like this are the servants,” I said, “but did you see anyone suspicious enter your room directly

beforehand, or anything along those lines?”

“I don’t believe so. I agree it would be easiest to assume that a servant did this, but that doesn’t help us narrow it down to any specific individual. A servant would also have no reason to do such a thing.”

I wondered: *Is that really the case? Servants might have their own reasons, and besides, there’s every chance they could be doing it under someone else’s orders. In fact, assuming the perpetrator is a member of the family, I doubt a noble would trouble themselves to write on the walls directly. They’d be more likely to give a maid some extra money to do their dirty work.*

“Do you still have any of the notes?”

He reached into his pocket and retrieved several pieces of paper. “I already cleaned up the writing that was on the walls, I’m afraid. I wanted to avoid the risk of anyone seeing it and raising a fuss, so I washed it off myself. These are all I have left to show you.”

I spread them out on the table and examined them. Indeed, all of them said “GET OUT” and nothing else. Based purely on the characteristics of the handwriting, it looked as if they’d all been written by the same person. The blocky and functional lettering also suggested it was probably a man’s hand.

“Did the writing on the walls appear to be from the same hand?”

He pondered for a moment. “I can’t be sure, I’m afraid. I believe it was similar, but slightly more crooked. It might just be that it’s harder to write on a wall than on a piece of paper.”

I took a moment to muse on this. *This handwriting seems rather too confident and high-class for a maid to have written it. It may have been a bit blockish, but it still comes across as the hand of someone educated. It’s not uncommon for a maid’s reading and writing ability to be quite limited. I doubt there are many who could write like this.*

That still left the possibility that the perpetrator had written the notes, then given them to a servant to secretly place in Lord Cedric’s surroundings. Then the servant might have used the notes as a reference, and copied the same style of writing onto the walls. *In which case, this handwriting could be a vital clue*

toward identifying whoever's responsible.

"Do you mind if I borrow these?"

"Not at all. Go ahead."

With his permission, I folded up the scraps of paper and sandwiched them between the pages of my notebook.

I was about to ask a further question when another knock came at the door.

"Come in," I answered. The door opened, revealing Lord Simeon.

His eyes rested on Lord Cedric and he froze in place. "I see." In an instant, all warmth seemed to drain from his light blue eyes. I might have imagined it, but I was fairly sure I hadn't. *Combined with the chilling effect of his glasses, it's like the iciness is multiplied by two, no, three!* The temperature had sunk so far, it was as if frost clung to his glasses.

"You've arrived just in time," I said, standing and beckoning him to join us.

"Lord Cedric was kindly furnishing me with some more details about his situation."

Alas, he merely stood and looked down at Lord Cedric, a scornful smile beginning to form. "Aren't you consulting with the wrong person? I believe it was my help you were seeking."

Lord Cedric hurriedly stood up as well. His voice trembled. "Oh, my apologies. You see...I..."

Such a shame that he can't gain any enjoyment from the Vice Captain's frozen glare! "I'm the one that asked him about it," I cut in. "Lord Cedric only came to apologize for what happened in the drawing room."

For anyone who isn't a fangirl, it will just feel like standard-issue torment. I thought it best to come to Lord Cedric's defense and try to melt Lord Simeon's ice.

I continued, "He was quite worried that we'd been forced to endure such unpleasantness immediately following our arrival. It's only natural that he'd come to me first, wouldn't you agree? A true gentleman will always put a lady first."

He cast a stone-cold glance toward me. I laughed inside. *Quite terrifying! I can't help wondering what's got him in such an extreme state of disarray.* "It's only because I kept him for so long that he was delayed in visiting your room, Lord Simeon. Please don't be so angry."

"I'm not angry," he grunted.

Liar.

He looked away with a sullen expression and sighed.

Lord Cedric, meanwhile, was so shaken that I couldn't help but feel sorry for him. "I must admit, however, it was most careless of me to enter a lady's room and go so far as to close the door behind me. Of course her fiancé will be offended."

It was true that a man and woman spending time alone together behind a closed door could lead to both of their reputations being besmirched. However, the topic of discussion being what it was, we could hardly have left the door open.

"Be that as it may," I interrupted, "I'd suggest that you both take a seat, so that the three of us can deal with the situation at hand."

Having forced the men to sit down, I first showed Lord Simeon the threatening notes, then followed up with my next question. "You mentioned that you had another reason, besides these threats, for feeling that you were in danger?"

He nodded, with a still-wary glance at Lord Simeon. "Since I came to live here, a number of suspicious things have happened. Situations where I was walking in the grounds when a potted plant fell from the balcony, or I was in a corridor and a picture frame fell through the stairwell from a higher floor. I narrowly escaped, but if those objects had found their mark, I don't think I'd have been left in one piece."

That certainly is a scary prospect. He can't even walk around in his home without fearing for his safety.

"Did you see anyone in the vicinity?" Lord Simeon asked.

Lord Cedric screwed up his face in thought. “The first time, I was so taken aback that I quite forgot to even look. But when it happened a second time, and then a third, I couldn’t help finding it odd, so I tried looking up to see if anyone was there. Sadly, I could never catch sight of anyone. That’s why all the others who live here have dismissed these events as mere accidents. Sometimes things simply fall, they say. I started to wonder if it might indeed all be a coincidence. Until I was pushed down the stairs, that is.”

“What?” I asked, eagerly leaning forward. “Someone pushed you, with their hand?”

“Yes. More precisely, what I remember is the feeling of pressure on my back. However, since they took me entirely by surprise, I caught no sight of who did it. All I could focus on was protecting my body as I tumbled down. Fortunately I didn’t sustain any serious injuries, but I swear to you, this was not a simple accident.”

He rolled up his sleeves to show us the bruises that were still left on his arms. The blue-black skin made me gasp in shock.

Lord Simeon took a long look and then asked, “Where exactly did this occur?”

“The grand staircase in the entrance hall.”

“From the very top?”

“Yes.”

“The staircase is interrupted by a landing halfway down, as I recall.”

“Indeed, and fortunately I was able to stop there rather than continuing my descent.”

I pictured the staircase in question. *If he only fell halfway, the distance isn’t too excessive. Quite a relief. He’d have sustained much more serious injuries if he’d fallen all the way to the bottom.*

“This must mean that someone is after him,” I said, looking at Lord Simeon. “It’s surely attempted murder.”

But he rested a finger lightly on his chin and cocked his head. “I’m not so certain. From what I’ve heard so far, I rather doubt that there was any

murderous intent.”

“Why, though, after how many times he’s been put in danger?” *How can he think there’s nothing murderous going on here!? In a story, it would be the most obvious thing in the world!*

“It’s relatively certain that someone means to intimidate him. However, let’s suppose a potted plant or picture frame had landed squarely on Lord Cedric’s head. There’s a high likelihood that he’d merely have been injured, not killed. As a way of murdering someone, it’s quite unreliable. It’s also rather difficult to aim at a moving target by dropping something from a higher point. If it were me, I’d find a more reliable method, one that was certain to result in death. Since they actually missed every time, he escaped without any injury at all, which makes it somewhat strange that they attempted the same method multiple times.”

A level-headed analysis. As he spoke, I did begin to see the logic in his deduction. *However, perhaps this only reflects what Lord Simeon would do based on his own thought processes. An amateur might not realize how unreliable their chosen method is. They might stick to it and try to murder someone that way regardless.*

He continued without missing a beat. “As for the staircase incident, the same can be said, of course. The pusher would have easily foreseen that he’d stop on the landing halfway down, so they couldn’t have expected Lord Cedric to die, unless his luck was particularly bad. Still, they pushed him anyway. I’d say that in all likelihood, their aim is not to kill him, but only to threaten him.”

Instinctively, I glanced over at Lord Cedric, and our eyes met. We stared intently at each other with a feeling I can’t quite describe.

Lord Simeon coughed. My gaze returned to him. Having regained our attention, Lord Simeon carried on speaking. “So, we have threatening notes and suspicious occurrences. My theory is that the perpetrator intended these as a warning for Lord Cedric. They expected that they’d scare him off. In other words, it’s not quite as serious as attempted murder, and we’ve no need to treat it that way.”

A silence fell. Lord Cedric looked entirely perplexed, unsure of how to

respond. Even if these circumstances could be deemed “not quite as serious,” that was small comfort. It did nothing to change the fact that someone had malicious intent toward him.

Fearing that Lord Simeon might declare everything resolved and suggest we go home, I countered with, “Even if you’re right, it doesn’t mean the perpetrator will necessarily limit their actions to mere threats in the future. There’s also the possibility that the threats themselves will end up causing irreparable harm. I don’t feel the outlook is entirely optimistic.”

He sighed, but nodded at the same time. “I suppose you’re right. For the time being, let’s be on our guard. Once the party to formally introduce him to society is over, we might find that the most prominent members of the family have accepted him as the heir. Then the perpetrator might simply give up.”

“That would resolve things very neatly, I suppose.” *But it doesn’t strike me as realistic. If they’re cornered like that, they might decide they have no choice but to dispose of him once and for all.* I can’t say I felt especially reassured.

But when I expressed that concern, Lord Simeon replied, “I’d expect things to be resolved even more quickly in that scenario. We’d be able to catch whoever it is red-handed. For now, all we can do is keep a close eye on things. Either our presence will make the perpetrator more vigilant and they’ll keep a low profile, or it will make them nervous and impatient, and they’ll set plans in motion in a rush. We’ll have to wait and see.”

He also warned Lord Cedric that it would be better if he didn’t leave the manor until after the night of the party. If we spent every moment by his side, it would alert the person who was after him, so it would be better if he stayed nearby and we kept watch from a distance. Lord Cedric nodded obediently, then left the room with another elaborate apology for causing us such bother.

Now that Lord Simeon and I were alone, I finally gave voice to the words that had been on the verge of bursting out of me. “Lord Simeon, don’t you think it’s rather obvious who the perpetrator is?”

“If you’re referring to Patrice, I doubt it will be that simple.”

A very blunt reply, but I wasn’t about to give in. I chuckled. “For you to have said that at least suggests that you, too, find him suspicious. And there’s more

there than just the fact that of all the people in the manor right now, he's the one most vocally opposed to Lord Cedric as the successor. There's a firm reason to suspect him. As I'm sure you're aware, Lord Patrice is strongly rumored to be in some financial trouble."

I'd gathered the information for just such a situation as this. I proceeded to regale Lord Simeon with the fruits of my daily labor. "He's fond of gambling—he's often seen at the racetracks, or at seedy gatherings with other gentlemen—and he's known to make more than the occasional visit to Tarentule, as well. I've heard he also borrowed rather a lot of money from his father without telling him."

"How on earth do you know about..." he began. "No, never mind. I'm sure I can guess." With a pensive countenance, he adjusted his glasses.

I hadn't just been listening to gossip, if that's what you're thinking. I'd verified a lot of it personally, too. I knew first-hand that he'd been paying visits to Tarentule. Incidentally, the beautiful flower for whom he had a predilection wasn't one of my goddesses, the Three Flowers. That wasn't hugely surprising—the place was teeming with other fine examples of the female form who knew how to capture a gentleman's heart.

"Until recently, he'd always depended on his mother to come to his rescue," I explained, "since she had such a soft spot for her boy. However, there was a line and he crossed it. Eventually he was drowning in debt, and then his father found out. Now it's only a matter of time until Lord Patrice is disowned."

"So your theory is that he's trying to solve this problem by getting his hands on House Pautrier's fortune? I fear you may be forgetting something: he has an older brother. Let's suppose Cedric is chased away, and the succession dilemma starts afresh. It would still be Patrice's brother whose name is put forward, not his own."

"There would still be a significant benefit to Lord Patrice, though. If his brother is adopted into House Pautrier, he'd become the heir to House Bernier." Not to mention that he had no other siblings, so Baron Bernier wouldn't be able to disown him, or he'd have no heir. Lord Patrice would no longer have to worry about his debts, or the looming threat of being disowned,

and he'd even become the successor to his house. It would be pure profit. There was more than enough reason for Lord Patrice to want Lord Cedric eliminated.

"Well," Lord Simeon replied, "I don't disagree with what you've said. Not as such. However, we must avoid getting too caught up in one theory. We should leave our minds open to other possibilities as well."

It seemed Lord Simeon wished to proceed with caution. I was ready to raise an objection, but after a moment's consideration, I thought better of it. *He's right, there's no use focusing on only one theory. It'll be better to share our thoughts and close in on the truth together.*

While I mused over what other possibilities there might be, Lord Simeon's tone of voice changed dramatically. "Putting the mystery aside for a moment, I do wish you'd give more attention to your own well-being," he lectured.

I blinked. "Is this regarding the closed door? I admit it's not exactly praiseworthy behavior, but even you must admit that it was justified by the circumstances. Had there been a risk of someone passing by and overhearing Lord Cedric, he wouldn't have felt free to speak openly."

"You should have summoned me. I was in the next room—hardly any distance at all—and yet you made no effort to call on me at all. Why?"

Hmm, I thought. He's not wrong.

In all honesty, Lord Cedric had entered with so little pause that I'd gotten caught up in the situation and had quite forgotten to consider my reputation at all. I had no choice but to admit that this was careless of me. "I'm sorry, Lord Simeon. I didn't mean to exclude you."

"That's not what I meant."

"I wasn't hiding anything from you. You must believe me! Otherwise in my next book I'll write about a hero, rather than a heroine, who experiences great misfortune and is rescued by a brave knight. Oh, naturally I won't write it in a way that's too crude or obvious. You'd only see it *that way* if you looked at it with a very particular mindset."

"I said that's not what I meant! Although I must ask...is that storyline already

finalized? Did your editor approve it?”

“Don’t worry,” I replied, “I’m sure my editor will wave it through quite happily.”

“With no regard for the opinion of the person it’s based on!?”

“If he has any specific requests about the hero’s appearance or the details of the plot, he’s welcome to share them for the author’s consideration!”

He let out a deep sigh. I asked if he’d be less bothered if I set it up so that the knight had a beautiful female lover as well, but he just told me to make it a girl with brown hair and glasses. *As if anyone could fangirl over that!*

Later, we took our seats for dinner. There we met a party consisting of the earl and countess, Lord Cedric, Lady Monique—who was the wife of Lord Cedric’s deceased uncle, the eldest son—and the other guests staying at the estate.

Two of the guests were an elderly couple that I hadn’t seen before. We were told that they were old friends of the earl and countess. Other than us, the only young people at the table were the Le Comte sisters. Lord Patrice was not present—apparently he was not, in fact, staying overnight. The conversation split neatly into an older group and a younger group, which is to say that the Le Comte sisters were unrestrained in their attentions toward Lords Simeon and Cedric.

Unlike Lord Patrice, they seemed very accepting of Lord Cedric as the successor. Their attitude toward him was very positive indeed. *I’m not entirely surprised. He holds a lot of appeal for young women, and he has a relaxed manner that makes him very easy to talk to.* However, it did not appear that they were devoted to him. Interested in him, certainly. However, the way they looked at him was entirely different from the way they looked at Lord Simeon.

Also, even as they lavished him with compliments, I sensed a certain coldness about them as well. I’d felt the same when I first laid eyes on them. When Lord Patrice had insulted Lord Cedric, they’d stood by in silence, expressing neither sympathy nor indignation. *They seem somewhat two-faced. I wonder what they’re hiding. Perhaps they could even be the true masterminds behind the threatening notes?*

No, I decided. I'm reading too much into things.

"You went to see the circus, didn't you? I'm terribly jealous! I wish I could go!"

"I also dreamed that we'd come to the city and then go on outings to the theater and such. The countryside is so dull. There was never anything to do. Are there any plays you'd recommend at the moment? Perhaps you could take us on a trip to the theater tomorrow, Lord Simeon? You could show us all the sights of Sans-Terre."

"You should come too, Lord Cedric! The four of us would make such a delightful party."

As the two sisters made merry, Lady Monique gazed at them with glacial eyes. After exchanging a few pleasantries at the start of dinner, she'd hardly spoken at all. Her attire was plain and somewhat morose as well, perhaps because she'd only recently lost her husband. Only a single emerald ring stood out, shining brightly on her left hand.

Before Lord Simeon or Lord Cedric could answer, Lady Monique chided the sisters. "It's highly inappropriate for you to make such a request of an engaged man. It's not only lacking in common sense, but very rude."

"Oh," said one of the sisters.

"I'd quite forgotten she was here," said the other. Their surprise at my presence was clear as day on their faces.

With a voice as sweet as a kitten, Evelyne said, "I apologize for causing you offense. I promise you, we had no ill intentions. We've only just moved to the city, so our eagerness got the better of us. Our great aunt and uncle rarely leave the estate, and Lord Cedric's still not familiar with the city either, so we were hoping someone who knows their way around could be our guide."

Suzette, the younger sister, spoke just as ingratiatingly. "You live in the city, so you must go to the theater relatively often already. Surely you wouldn't mind if we borrowed Lord Simeon? Just for a little while?"

Lady Monique and the earl both frowned at the girls, who showed no sign of learning their lesson even after being told off. The other elderly attendees looked slightly disgusted as well.

Instead of responding directly, I turned to the side and smiled up at Lord Simeon. I decided I'd leave it up to him.

"I'm afraid I've been hoping to have a chance to look at Earl Pautrier's collection. I've heard the house is in possession of a rare example of Shilin pottery. If you've no objection, I'd like to stay here and give it a look." A frank rejection, coupled with a question directed at the earl himself, whose troubled expression cleared up immediately.

"My, I had no idea you were interested in such things."

"It's not that I have a particular eye for antiques," Lord Simeon replied, "but rather, that they're extremely valuable from a historical perspective. They tell us all kinds of things about the culture of eastern countries in that time period. I find that very interesting. Marielle, are you familiar with Shilin pottery?"

I nodded. "Somewhat. I believe it's most noted for its translucent jade green color, yes? I've seen some broken fragments of pots, and the color was breathtaking! The technique was lost with the downfall of the Shilin Dynasty, so only a handful of examples still exist. Any that have been preserved in a complete and undamaged state can essentially be considered national treasures. Are you the only person who has one in a private collection, Earl Pautrier?"

He smiled with deep satisfaction. "No, I've heard that a wealthy person in Easdale has one as well, but you're certainly correct about their rarity. I'm not one to find much interest in jewels and works of art, but this piece holds a special place for me. I must say, I hadn't expected a young couple to be so familiar with them. I'll gladly show you it when we have a moment."

Lord Simeon expressed his gratitude for this generous offer, and the discussion turned to the eastern countries. He conversed with the older dining guests and brought new life to their previously somber conversation.

His knowledge was just as vast as one would expect. I knew a fair amount myself, owing to having read so many books, but I couldn't always keep pace with Lord Simeon and the earl's discussion. The Le Comte sisters began to sulk, as they'd been left behind completely.

The surprise was Lord Cedric, who followed the conversation and took part in

it, albeit in his reserved way. *Anyone who mocks him for being raised as a commoner would benefit from seeing this*, I thought to myself. *His knowledge of history and art is far deeper than most of the other nobles around here.*

After we'd finished dinner and enjoyed tea together, the earl led us to his collection room. The Le Comte sisters were stopped by Lady Monique and stayed behind at the dinner table. *Probably to receive another lecture*, I thought. I glanced back for just a moment, and her eyes were ferocious. *My word!*

Indeed, though, I was sure I'd been thinking too hard in trying to associate them with the threatening notes. *I doubt they have any thoughts as complicated as that. All they care about is finding men with good prospects. With looks like theirs, they must think any gentleman will be at their beck and call the moment they invite his attention. Perhaps where they come from, that was the case. Sadly for them, Lord Simeon has seen more than enough young ladies, and has had his fill of them courting his affection.*

And he'd turned them all down. Despite appearances, he was an exceptionally serious and straight-laced individual, and his heart wasn't easily moved. *No, I think he could only feel that way about a woman who offered a unique kind of appeal that other young ladies lack.*

But I had no idea what kind of young lady that would be. Perhaps Lord Simeon hadn't even thought much about it himself, I considered. I couldn't recall ever seeing him express an interest in anyone.

I wondered what I would do if someone did come along that provoked his passions.

I quickly shook off the deep feelings of doubt that began to surface. I didn't want to think about it.

So I went back to thinking about the Le Comte sisters. They made no secret of their interest in Lord Cedric, so perhaps they had resolved to marry men from particularly good families. If so, there was nothing unusual about that. In fact, it was quite expected of any young lady who was about to make her debut. After moving to the city, full of anticipation, Lord Cedric must have seemed to them like the ideal candidate. His age, appearance and character were exactly right,

and they'd been blessed with the opportunity to meet him and get close to him before the other young ladies of society.

There was a slight issue, however, in that there were two of them and only one of Lord Cedric. Knowing that one of them would lose out, Lord Simeon's arrival must have excited them a great deal.

When I saw these very typical young ladies, and their great enthusiasm for securing a partner, I felt very keenly just how different I was. I enjoyed writing novels more than talking to eligible bachelors, I enjoyed the human observation that helped with that, and since my debut I'd made no effort to find a husband whatsoever. If my parents hadn't arranged any proposals, I'd most definitely have remained unmarried for my entire life.

I'm impressed with the sisters for going to so much effort of their own volition. I'm not going to hand over Lord Simeon, though. My apologies, Le Comte sisters! I also need to keep hold of my suitor...and more importantly, there's no one I could ever fangirl over as much as him.

Leaving the sisters in Lady Monique's special care, we walked along the second-floor corridor with the older guests. We soon arrived at the door to a secluded room, which the butler opened with a key. Lord Cedric pushed Earl Pautrier's wheelchair into the room, and the rest of us followed.

I let out a cry of wonder as the butler lit the lamps one by one. An array of jewels shone and sparkled, reflecting the light. It was as if they'd been holding everything in, waiting for people to visit, and now they were calling out to us.

Compared to the austere appearance of every other room in the house, this was the exact opposite. The precious stones collected by the earl's ancestors were laid out on display, on shelves and in glass cases. Ornamental items such as rings and necklaces were arranged alongside beautiful scrimshaw and pottery. Oddly, scattered amongst them were things like taxidermied animals and ominous, unsettling sculptures.

I remember this, I thought, drawing near to a small statue. This round silhouette that emphasizes the chest and hips, with an unnaturally large abdomen. If the book I read a while ago was correct, the head can be removed...

"Is something the matter with that statue?" asked Lord Simeon, having

noticed how eagerly I was staring at it.

I contained my excitement as best I could and turned to face the earl. "This is a cursed goddess statue passed down in the southern Djalma tribe, isn't it? There's a hollow cavity inside that's often used to store poison. Apparently they make the poison by extracting the venom of snakes that live deep in the jungle, and it's been used by assassins since ancient times. That's right, isn't it? I've love to open it and see inside, if you don't mind. There might even still be poison inside it!"

Lord Simeon grabbed my hand and pulled it away from the statue. "I've said this before, but how on earth do you know something like that? Leave it alone, these items aren't to be touched."

"Doesn't it thrill you just a little? Don't you feel your fanboy heart pounding?"

"I do indeed. That's precisely why we shouldn't touch it. Please get away from it."

While the others glared on in shock, the earl laughed and said, "It takes an unusual young lady to enter a room like this and be drawn to this statue before anything else. In any case, you're quite right. It's a Djalman goddess statue, apparently obtained by one of my more eccentric forebears. I must disappoint you, however. It's empty. Apparently it was never used at all."

Really? I thought. *One that was never even used? I can't say I'm not a bit disappointed.* Even so, it was a real goddess statue. The earl kindly allowed me to draw a sketch to remember it by. Its unsettling features really got my creative juices flowing.

Lord Simeon sighed, while beside him, Lord Cedric giggled softly.

"You have such an extensive knowledge, Miss Marielle," said the earl. "You knew all about the Shilin pottery, too. You must have had a very good education."

"Oh, no, I hardly know anything at all about this. I simply remembered reading a description of it in a book once."

"Do you like books?" he asked.

“Very much.”

“Hmm, then perhaps you’d be interested in this.”

At the earl’s instruction, the butler opened a box containing an antique book. Its cover was resplendent, and it was bound with gold leaf. Its pages, made of parchment, held the text of a well-known classic. However, its real value was in neither the contents nor the binding.

I stared in wonder. *This is a first edition. It’s a clean copy of the author’s handwritten manuscript—the very first version of the book to be produced.* “It’s incredible that you have something like this.”

Good gracious, the difference between my house and his is as vast as an ocean. If I could leave here with even one of these treasures, I expect I’d be set for life.

The earl and butler showed us all kinds of things and explained their histories. At last we came to the star of the show: the Shilin pottery. It was much smaller than I’d expected: a tiny incense burner that could have fit into one of my hands. However, the unique jade green color was as splendid as rumor had suggested, and it was adorned with spectacular decorative work. All present let out murmurs of fascination and wonder.

“Am I right in thinking this was made in the late period of the dynasty?” asked Lord Simeon, gazing fervently at it. “It seems to bear the influence of Shulk and Gandia culture, which had the effect of making Shilin pottery even more ornate in that time period.”

“Yes,” the earl replied. “It’s nothing short of a miracle that it’s been preserved in one piece.”

It was the most excited I’d ever seen Lord Simeon about anything. *So this is what he finds interesting! There must be all kinds of exciting treasures in House Flaubert’s collection room, too. I’ll have to ask him to show me at some point.*

Almost everyone had crowded around the incense burner, their enthusiasm entirely unbridled, but Lord Cedric stood a few steps back on his own, looking around the room. I asked him, “Out of all the things in this room, which do you find the most intriguing, Lord Cedric?”

He turned to face me with an awkward smile. “Honestly, places like this make me rather uncomfortable. I can’t shake the fear that I might accidentally knock something over and break it. I can’t relax for long enough to be intrigued by any of it.”

I met his unvarnished words with a grin. “I more or less understand how you feel. That incense burner, in particular, would be completely ruined if someone dropped it. The thought of getting too close to it is slightly terrifying.”

“Indeed. I understand how remarkable it is, but by the same token, it’s so remarkable, I’m deathly afraid of being too careless in too close a proximity to it. All I can think is that I’d have absolutely no way of paying for the damages.”

The earl cut in, chiding him. “What foolishness is this? You’re to inherit every item in this room, you know.”

Lord Cedric flinched a little.

“You must come to inhabit your role as the heir, and you must do it quickly,” the earl continued. “You mustn’t behave in a way that lowers our house’s esteem.”

“There’s no need to berate him,” said one of the elderly guests. “I’m sure he’ll grow into it with time.”

“He’s far better than the type of person who’d enter a room like this and see nothing but piles of money,” said another.

Lord Cedric turned to me slightly and gave the tiniest of shrugs. That playful gesture broke the momentary tension, and the two of us laughed quietly at one another. Lord Simeon looked at both of us with a hard scowl.

This won’t do at all. Not at all! I must remain prim and proper in front of the earl. I rushed to change the subject. “It truly is an extraordinary collection. Every last item seems like something Lutin might have his eyes on. Are they safely guarded?”

“Do you mean Lutin, the mischievous fairy?” asked Lord Cedric, a hint of puzzlement in his voice.

“You’ve heard of him, haven’t you? He’s the thief everyone’s talking about

lately.”

“Indeed,” he said, scratching his head. “I believe I saw something about him in the newspaper.”

“He’s targeting rich families one after another,” I said. “Given the astonishing collection we see here, House Pautrier should be on its guard as well.”

The butler’s face lit up with a self-confident smile. “I can assure you, there’s no need for concern. The locked door that we entered by is the only way into this room, and the most valuable items are stored in locked cabinets of their own. Furthermore, I carry the keys on my person at all times.”

I looked around. Indeed, the only windows were thin slivers, nowhere near wide enough for a person to slip through. They were only there to provide light and ventilation. There were also multiple keys needed in order to access everything, and it seemed they were being handled in a suitably secure fashion.

But I couldn’t help wondering: *Does Lutin even need a key? Couldn’t he open the door with a single wire, or something similarly inventive?*

“I’ve heard the rumors of this famous burglar,” said the earl to Lord Simeon in an upbeat tone, “and I wouldn’t mind if he came for us right now. It would be like a moth to the flame, don’t you think?”

I wish he’d turn up here as well! My dream of an epic showdown would come true after all!

After leaving the room, Lord Simeon had found Earl Pautrier’s favor to such an extent that he was invited to continue chatting with him. I walked ahead, my intention being to return to the guest rooms. In the corridor, however, I happened upon the Le Comte sisters.

“Your educational visit is already over, I see,” said Evelyne.

I offered a smile and a nod. “Yes, the earl was kind enough to show us all sorts of wonderful things.”

Perhaps because there was no one else around, the sisters felt able to be candid. Evelyne replied with a mocking snort, “You’ve made excellent work of winning our great uncle’s favor by pretending you understood and joining in

with the conversation. The elderly seem to be rather fond of you in general! You blend in with them quite naturally, in fact.” Both of them cackled.

I suppose my plainness and dullness must in some way make me reminiscent of an old person. Now that I think about it, the elderly have always been rather fond of me.

Suzette looked me up and down, scrutinizing every detail. “Considering you live in the city, you’re terribly unfashionable. How long ago was that dress in style? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The sisters’ dresses were in bright, lively colors, and were lavishly decorated with lace and ribbons. Mine, in contrast, was navy blue, and decorated in more of a low-key manner. Nonetheless, it was, in fact, entirely in keeping with the fashion of the day.

“It’s Lord Simeon that I feel sorry for. How awful to have an engagement to a girl like this forced upon him.”

“I know it must have been arranged between their houses, but if you compare the two partners, one can’t help but find her to be sorely lacking. Poor him!”

I sighed internally. It was exactly as they said. I had no idea what Father and Lord Simeon had discussed that led to the proposal, but in some way, shape, or form, they’d arranged it between them. The precise nature of their negotiations was still a complete mystery to me.

I’d tried asking Father, but all he’d told me was, “There weren’t any negotiations.” What reason could there be, I wondered, that was so secret it had to be hidden even from me? It was so strange, I was a little scared to even press the matter too firmly.

I looked at the floor and listened to the sisters’ words in silence, which invited them to grow even bolder and let out a string of further insults. The lines themselves weren’t especially creative, but their extreme maliciousness was still quite interesting. These young ladies gave off a slightly different impression compared to the bullies I’d faced in the past. They were somehow more direct, and slightly lacking in class. Unpolished, one might say. Where a high-class lady’s insults were sometimes so impressive they’d leave you trembling, the sisters’ attempts had not a single shred of wit about them.

But stories need characters like this as well, don't they? If everyone's perfectly high-class at all times, it would be quite dull. Having a wide variety of supporting characters makes the heroes and villains stand out even further.

So I kept listening, quietly eager to take as much from this experience as I could, when the sound of footsteps began to approach from behind me. The sisters instantly ceased their assault.

I heard the voice before I could even turn around. "Why stand around talking in the corridor? You could go inside the room instead." It was Lord Cedric. I thought he'd stay and accompany Lord Simeon in talking to the earl, but he'd returned already. He wore his usual calm smile. "You know, I hadn't realized that conversations between ladies could be so animated."

"We did get rather excited," said Evelyne amiably, as if all the abuse she'd hurled at me moments before had never happened. "We were asking her about fashion. Marielle is so sophisticated, just as you'd expect from someone who lives in the city of flowers."

"It's true," Suzette added, with just as heavy a dose of irony as her sister. "I'm so jealous that she's always in touch with the cutting edge of fashion."

Lord Cedric nodded, grinning. "Ah, indeed, her dress is the latest winter fashion," he said with a casual air. "It's the height of style and class right now to shy away from ostentatious colors and deliberately wear understated hues instead."

Both of the sisters blanched. They stared unblinkingly at my dress. It was true—their outfits were the ones that were out of fashion. The mainstream style that season was to add embroidery the same color as the main fabric, so that the dresses looked plain at first glance, but were actually highly detailed.

The city's fashions were changing all the time, so by the time they reached the countryside, the next wave was already on the horizon. They didn't know quite how right they were in their comments about me.

Evelyne's eyes met mine, and for the briefest moment she peered at me with extreme loathing. "We'll retire for the day. Goodbye." And they both turned on their heels and walked off.

Lord Cedric watched them go with not a trace of shock. When they were gone, he looked down at me with a mischievous grin.

I had a sudden thought, and gave voice to it. "You heard them, didn't you?"

"Overheard, you might say. But yes, I did."

He started to apologize on their behalf, but I interrupted. "It's quite all right. In fact, I'm grateful to you for coming to my defense."

"I felt their bullying had gone rather too far, that's all. Still, I wonder if you really wanted me to butt in."

His demeanor as he smiled at me this time felt different from the other times we'd spoken. He'd always come across as a kind and gentle person, but here he showed a hint of darkness in his smile, along with a jovial curiosity toward me. "No matter how much they said to you, it hardly seemed to have any impact at all. You had the calm composure of a veteran with years of combat experience. Quite honestly, it's the exact opposite of what one would expect from the first impression you create."

"I'm used to it, that's all. Besides, I can't deny their allegations as such. My face and figure are entirely plain and dull. If they're pointing out the truth, I can do little more than acknowledge it."

"I feel that all of this is very superficial, however." He stooped down and took a close look at me. "People's faces show you who they are inside. You're always holding yourself in, pretending you're plain and ordinary. Isn't that right? Your true face is the one you wore when you watched the circus performers, or just now when you looked at the goddess statue. You're overflowing with innocent curiosity. I don't mean to flatter you, but I must say, I found you quite lovely in those moments."

My word! No man has ever told me THAT before. "Thank you most kindly. You also seem quite unlike the first impression I had of you, Lord Cedric. I thought you were more simple and naive than you turned out to be. You're actually rather formidable, aren't you?"

"Am I? Who knows."

We both giggled.

“And you know so much about ladies’ fashion.”

“Ah, you see, I had no choice but to study it carefully. If I expose myself as a yokel before all of high society, I’ll embarrass my grandfather.” If the Le Comte sisters had heard him say that, they’d have died of indignation. He could say such harsh things with such a carefree look on his face. My first impression of him really had been completely off the mark. I recalled what Lord Simeon had said: we had no proof that anything he said was true. It made me wonder.

“I was also impressed by how much you knew about art and history,” I told him.

“I had an interest in those already, which made it easier. I clearly can’t compete with Lord Simeon’s extensive background, however. I suppose that’s what separates me from the genuine noblemen. I felt a need to try and learn a thing or two by taking after him.”

Interesting...

“Ah, I almost forgot,” said Lord Cedric. “There was something I meant to give you. That was why I followed you here. It’s nothing too grandiose, but I’d like you to take it anyway.”

“Something for me? You needn’t have gone to the trouble.”

“It’s nothing, honestly. Only, I recently passed by a certain shop that was full of young ladies. When I asked what it was, I was told it was a sweet shop that’s *en vogue* right now, so I bought a present for my grandparents. Then I thought of you, too. As a means of expressing my gratitude, I’m afraid it is rather meager, but...”

“That sounds delicious. I adore sweets.”

“That is a relief,” he said, inviting me to follow him with an embarrassed smile.

His room had apparently been used by his father, Lord Constant, a long time ago. Naturally, I didn’t go inside, but stayed outside the door and watched Lord Cedric enter.

Though he walked with a bounce in his step, all of a sudden he stopped in

place. Concerned, I took a small step into the room.

“Lord Cedric, what’s...” But before I could even finish my sentence, I froze in shock as well.

The opposite wall was covered in writing. In bright, red letters were scrawled the words: “Get out now if you value your life. If you persist in having ideas above your station, you will suffer the consequences.”

Chapter Three

Initially, I thought the letters were written in blood. Taking a closer look, however, it was red chalk. Touching it left red dust all over my finger. “I didn’t know they made chalk in this color.”

“That’s your first thought?” asked Lord Simeon, exasperated, as he kindly wiped the red dust from my finger. He took a good look at the handkerchief he’d used, then returned his attention to the lettering on the wall. “The handwriting’s the same as on the threatening notes, I see.”

“Yes. It seems implausible that anyone could have written it just by copying an example.”

That might have been possible for a short phrase, I thought, but with a message this long, the differences would have been obvious. It’s clear that this was written by a confident hand.

Lord Patrice had left before dinner and wasn’t currently in the manor. Assuming that hadn’t been an act—he wasn’t secretly still there after all—it was impossible for him to have written this.

I sighed. “I suppose my guess was mistaken.”

“He’s not our only suspect,” Lord Simeon replied. “Quite a number of people would have sufficient motive.”

“But we are limited to the people who are here at present. Which means...it might have been written on Lord Patrice’s behalf, by a servant who’s skilled at writing? He could still be the mastermind after all.”

“If so, we’d easily be able to find out who wrote it simply by asking all the servants to write something and comparing their handwriting. Then it’s only a small step to find out who asked them to do it. I doubt the perpetrator would behave so carelessly.”

He did have a point. The letters were quite distinct, so investigating based on that would have turned up the answer immediately in that scenario. *But then,*

what possibilities are left?

I was staring at the wall, my head tilted, when Lord Cedric returned, holding a bucket.

“Well?” I asked.

He shook his head. “It was Anne who prepared the room before bed. I asked her, but it seems she saw nothing out of the ordinary at that time.”

“Is that particular maid able to write?” Lord Simeon asked.

But Lord Cedric shook his head again. “She can write her name, but that’s all. She’s from an agrarian background.”

Lord Simeon nodded, as if he’d expected nothing else. Lord Cedric came over to us and put the bucket on the floor. “Do you mind if I clean it off already?”

“Go right ahead,” said Lord Simeon.

“Let me help,” I said, putting my hand out, but Lord Cedric gently put his own out to block it.

“Thank you, that’s quite all right. I’m used to cleaning up this sort of thing by now. There’s no need to sully your delicate fingers.”

He knelt down and took my hand softly, almost as if he was about to kiss it. Above him, Lord Simeon coughed loudly.

Lord Cedric let go of my hand and picked up a washcloth. He made short work of cleaning the wall. *He really is used to this*, I thought. The red letters besmirching the walls were wiped away in a flash, leaving no trace.

But even if he was born a commoner and is used to doing his own housework, it makes for a lonesome spectacle. Does he really have to borrow cleaning implements in secret and take care of this on his own without even summoning one servant?

“Lord Cedric, are you sure it wouldn’t be best to at least talk to Earl Pautrier or Lady Monique about this, or the butler at least? There’s no need to stay quiet in the face of such vicious treatment.”

He considered my suggestion for a moment, then let out a small sigh and

shook his head. “No, I’d much rather not. If my grandfather learns of this, he’ll probably scorn and reprimand me for being so helpless. I’m also very eager to avoid letting my grandmother fret over this. And as of now, I don’t even know to what extent the servants truly accept me as their master.”

I had no idea what to say in response to his cold words. *So that’s how he looks at this situation. Is that the kind of environment he finds himself in? One that encourages him to think that way? Perhaps he really does have absolutely no one here he can trust. That must be why he asked us total strangers to help him.*

“I must ask both of you to keep this to yourselves, as well. If word spreads of this, it will only lead to embarrassment.”

“We’ll do that,” said Lord Simeon, “but let me ask you one thing. I’d like to know how you feel about this.”

Lord Cedric was confused by the question, but in all honesty, so was I. *Is it really necessary to ask that?*

“How I feel?” he replied.

“I’ll rephrase the question,” said Lord Simeon, speaking in a neutral tone—with neither sympathy nor censure in his voice. “Are you absolutely set on inheriting the earldom? Is it something you want to do, no matter what? Look at the kind of harsh treatment it’s invited. It’s clear that this is not a comfortable place for you to be. Do the social status and fortune have so much appeal to you that you’d stay the course regardless? I’d like you to tell us honestly what your thoughts are about all this.”

His approach was one very suited to his job, which involved confirming the truth. Some might have found it emotionless, but it was probably easier to answer the question when it was posed this way rather than mixed in with a lot of empty platitudes.

With newfound comprehension, Lord Cedric replied, “I have no intention of giving in to the threats and leaving. I’m well aware that people see me as being after the fortune, but I still can’t let myself be beaten by such underhanded tactics. It’s true that I was raised a commoner. My mother was a working-class servant, which means I’m of a birth that is in no way suited to the rank of earl. It’s not that I particularly yearn to inherit the title. Quite frankly, it doesn’t

matter to me at all. It's only that my father was so concerned about the house he'd abandoned, right up until the end."

Lord Cedric looked toward the window, his face full of memories of people he'd lost. "He had a strict father, and a mother who did what her husband said. His older brother was the successor, the pride and joy, while he himself could hope for nothing but being adopted into some other family as a son-in-law. My father found this environment unbearable, and that's why he escaped it, but doing so still left a deep scar in his heart. He often called himself one of life's losers. He would continually tell me that I mustn't let life defeat me, that I should never run away, no matter how painful things become. I feel I'm not only here for myself, but also so that I can fight in my father's stead."

He looked back at us, and though his eyes were placid, they appeared to house an unshakable will. "A grand series of coincidences led to me taking this leap into a place that might as well be a different world for me. Still, I want to accept this. It's my life now, and I'll take it on. I want to overcome the challenges without running in fear, so that I can stand in front of my parents' graves and hold my head up high. I want to be acknowledged by my grandparents in place of my father. Those are my honest feelings."

Lord Simeon paused for a moment, then nodded. "Understood." He put an arm around me, and at his urging, I started walking out of the room with him. "There's one more thing I'd like to mention," he continued. "As far as possible, you should try to avoid being alone. In particular, don't let yourself be caught unawares in a place where others aren't around to see. As for the threatening notes and the writing on the wall, we'll continue to investigate on our own."

"All right," said Lord Cedric. "And thank you once again. Oh, hold on a moment! Miss Marielle, I almost forgot." He dashed over to a cabinet and brought back a box with a ribbon around it. "For you."

"Thank you most kindly," I said, accepting the sweets. "There's something I'd like to tell you too, incidentally, and that's not to worry too much. There are people in the world who are full of ill intentions and malice, but there are plenty of kind people as well. I believe that human relationships are like a mirror. People who are friendly and cheerful see smiles reflected back at them as well. As long as you never lose your sincere and honest nature, I'm certain

that you'll meet people who reward your kindness."

There. I'd said everything I possibly could to reassure him. As I spoke, a smile had steadily formed on his face.

"I'm so grateful for your words. I believe that one such person has appeared already."

"Two, in fact." I smiled up at Lord Simeon.

Lord Simeon said nothing, but he replied with a nod, at least.

We left Lord Cedric's room together and walked along the corridor, where we encountered Lady Monique, walking toward us with quiet footsteps. Although she noticed us, she didn't attempt any conversation, and merely gave a slight bow as she walked past.

I casually turned back to look, and observed that Lady Monique's eyes were focused intently on Lord Cedric's door. Her expression was far from calm—in fact, her eyes were very dark indeed.

Now that I think about it, where was Lady Monique after dinner? We haven't ascertained that at all.

We reached the guest bedrooms, and Lord Simeon opened his door. I bid him good night and was about to return to my neighboring room, when he forcibly pulled me into his room.

The instant the door was closed, he pointed to the box in my hand. "And that is...?"

I showed him the shop name engraved on the lid. "It's a box of sweets. He said he was just passing by so he bought some as a present."

He paused. "I see." *How odd. He's turned completely sullen again. His cold gaze is unbearable—I'm a little scared.* "Especially for you?"

"To show his gratitude, he said. He was buying some for Countess Simone, so he just decided to buy some for me as well."

Without even asking, Lord Simeon took the box from me. At first it looked as if he was just checking the inscription, but then he untied the ribbon straight away.

“Lord Simeon!”

He opened the lid and looked inside. Ten chocolates, round and each the size of one mouthful, were arranged neatly inside. The specialty bonbons of this particular shop.

I cried out. “Are you starting to eat them without me? That’s so rude!”

He held the box above me at a height I couldn’t reach with my hands, then began to enjoy the bonbons on his own. “Hmm, they do seem to be ordinary bonbons.”

How mean of him! I want to eat them too! This shop’s reputation was such that its sweets always sold out immediately, so it would have been hard to get more even if I wanted to. “Give me back my sweets!”

“There don’t seem to be any irregularities, but I’ll keep them, just in case.”

“Irregularities?” I exclaimed. “What irregularities!? You’re just making an excuse to have the bonbons all to yourself. I didn’t realize you had such a sweet tooth. All right, we can each have half the box. I was planning to share them with you anyway.”

“That’s not the issue here. If you’d like some bonbons, I’ll gladly buy some for you. Just let me take these ones.”

“But why? They were a gift from Lord Cedric!”

With a sullen look, he closed the lid and left the box on a nearby table. Then he put an arm around my waist and glared down at me. “You seem to be very supportive of him, but I’d ask you to keep a levelheaded attitude. It’s better not to trust him too much.”

“In what way, specifically, do you think he’s not worthy of trust? Is it that he says he’s had an interest in history and art since before all this, but he showed no interest at all while we were in the collection room? Or perhaps that he’s fiercely determined not to back down in the face of these threats, yet he’s put all the burden of solving the issue on us?”

At this, his well-formed eyebrows shot up. “You’ve thought about this more seriously than I expected.”

“Why, what did you expect? Observing other people is my main pastime and also what I use to earn money. It’s a highly trained skill.”

“Oh, indeed. So it is.” He looked up at the ceiling and exhaled. “But in that case, shouldn’t you be a little more understanding of...”

“Of what?”

But he simply looked at me again and said, “No, nothing. In any case, since you’ve noticed it as well, I might as well mention that something doesn’t seem quite right about Cedric. It’s all in a manner whereby you’d never notice unless you observed him very closely, but it reminds me of a performance, as if he’s skillfully keeping himself restrained to this level. A normal person, with no ulterior motive, wouldn’t behave like that.”

“There have been a few times that he made me wonder as well,” I replied. “But then, people do have all kinds of different thoughts and ideas. We can’t expect Lord Cedric to be entirely open with us about every aspect of his life. It’s perfectly normal to keep one or two things to himself, isn’t it?”

“It is indeed, provided the things he’s keeping to himself are entirely harmless. I’m only suggesting that, given the circumstances, we should remain on our guard with him as well.”

I could understand Lord Simeon’s unease, but I still wondered if it was really necessary to be so wary of Lord Cedric. I couldn’t help but have my doubts. “You seem to have had some ill feelings toward Lord Cedric right from the moment we met him. Do you not feel that if you put aside your assumptions and preconceptions, you might have more trust in him?”

“Do *you* not feel that your excess of sympathy for him leads you to overlook some points that it would be better not to overlook?”

Stalemate. For a moment, we stood and glared at each other. It seemed unlikely we’d find any agreement here. Our opinions were entirely at cross purposes.

Lord Simeon apparently had the same thought. The tension in the air dissipated in an instant. “In any case, please don’t forget to keep your distance from him. Don’t allow yourself to get too close.”

“I wasn’t especially planning to get close to him anyway,” I said with a reluctant nod. However, there was one way in which I would not yield to him. Casually keeping watch of Lord Simeon’s movements, I found my chance and leapt to the table, grabbing the box of bonbons.

Lord Simeon raised his eyebrows. “Marielle!” Clearly, he hadn’t expected me to do that.

“They were for me!” With the box in hand, I ran away from Lord Simeon.

Sadly, though I won the battle, I was about to lose the war. *The doorway’s behind Lord Simeon. At this rate, he’ll grab it back before I can make my escape!*

I decided to preempt this by opening the lid then and there. *This is no time for proper conduct, I decided. Lord Simeon broke the rules first!*

I took a bonbon and brought it toward my mouth. Almost there, almost there—but no luck. He grabbed my hand and used my own fingers to put the bonbon into *his* mouth.



My fingertips felt a soft, warm sensation. For an instant, they were tickled by something wet. My face blanched. *Wh-What is he...doing with...my fingers?*

With them still right by his mouth, he looked down at me with his piercing light blue eyes. A numbness spread from my fingertips and swept through my entire body. He didn't let me go. I was acutely aware of his breath as it hit my fingers.

Without saying a word, he took the box from me again, as I stood petrified, unable to resist, or indeed to do anything but stare like a fool.

Then he began to eat all of the remaining bonbons.

As he threw them into his mouth, one after another, all I could do was utter a faint whimper. His cheeks bulged out like a squirrel, then he vigorously chewed them all.

Isn't he supposed to be dashing handsome? There's nothing elegant or beautiful about this at all!

The sensuality I'd felt mere moments ago had been dashed to pieces.

Then he pressed a hand to his mouth and groaned. "Too sweet..."

I looked up at him with no sympathy. "You are rather a fool, Lord Simeon."

The box had gone from mostly full to completely empty in seconds flat. No matter how delicious they are, eating ten bonbons in one sitting is never a good choice. One's mouth is sure to be left with an irritating sense of cloying sweetness. *Serves him right for having them all to himself!*

He rubbed his stomach, a look of severe discomfort on his face.

"Eyes bigger than your stomach?" I asked.

He grunted. "I never want to see anything sweet again for the rest of my life..."

"Well," I said, turning on my heel, "you've made your bed, now you can lie in it."

I stormed out of the room. For the remainder of that night, I refused to forgive him. *Liqueur bonbons are my favorite, and he didn't let me have a single*

one. How dare he? How DARE he!?

A grudge over bonbons is a heavy grudge indeed.

The next day, still bearing animosity toward Lord Simeon, I decided to leave him behind for now and devote myself to investigating further on my own.

I donned an outfit that I'd borrowed from Natalie, my own maid, then pulled my hair back into a tight bun and covered it with a white cloth. As a finishing touch, I put on a freshly laundered apron. No one could have possibly looked at me and seen anything but a mere servant—the perfect disguise, if I do say so myself. In all honesty, I feel that it suited me more than a noblewoman's dresses anyway.

A maid's clothes will fit into any noble residence to a fairly natural degree, and fortunately enough, this particular manor's female servants wore exactly the same clothes as those worn in my own. I was able to blend in flawlessly.

I employed my special skill—blending into the scenery, becoming like air, pushing my lack of any presence to the limit so that no one noticed me at all—and used it to overhear conversations between the servants.

“For pity's sake, those selfish, ungrateful sisters!” spat one of the older maids, a terrifying scowl on her face. “We're already rushed off our feet trying to get ready for the party—only two days away!—and they keep asking for more, more, more. It's one thing after another with those two! And guess what it was this time... They wanted to decorate the manor with flowers, so they asked me to go and cut some *immediately*. Do they realize what time of year it is!? I told them they were greenhouse flowers and they wouldn't be ready for the day after tomorrow, and one of them accused me of “back talk” and started throwing books! *Very* high and mighty considering they're country girls with no noble rank at all!”

It seems the Le Comte sisters are trying to have everything done according to their say-so, with little thought for the circumstances of the estate around them.

A younger serving girl gleefully added her own fuel to the fire. “They're after Lord Cedric, you know. It's so shameful, they make no effort to hide it at all! They drool over that other gentleman, the one who's staying as a guide. I'm sure at the party, they'll also be putting their desperation to find eligible

husbands front and center. But who'd want nasty women like that? No one, that's who!"

Conversations among servants did tend to be like this. Naturally, there were things they could say to one another that they'd never dream of saying within earshot of their masters.

"They asked me to go digging through one of the guest's wardrobes!" said another. "You know, that girl, uh...what was her name again? The young noblewoman who's come to stay. They told me to find out what dresses she's brought with her and report back to them."

"Oh! I heard about this!" said one more. "They tried to make fun of her, but they were left with egg on their faces when it turned out THEY were the ignorant yokels with outdated fashion sense! Apparently that really got on their nerves. They want to put on airs, but the truth is, they don't know a thing!"

In fact, it turned out that I was to gain a detailed knowledge of the sisters' clothes, rather than the other way around. Thanks to the barbed words that continued to be exchanged between the servants, I became exhaustively familiar with everything they wore, from head to toe. Still, even in the midst of their judgmental comments, it was clear that these women had a keen interest in fashion. They also spoke of the sisters having brought a lot of jewels with them. Presumably they were very eager to impress at their high society debut in the city.

"I'm sure Lord Cedric would refuse to marry either of them. He'd be better to go for that young lady, the guest. She doesn't make a strong impression at first—I can't even remember her face—but she doesn't put on airs or come to us with unreasonable requests. She's just a nice girl who's not too much of a handful. That's the kind of wife he should go for."

Goodness, I thought. It's not just the elderly who are fond of me, but servants as well. Although for the reason to be that I'm "not too much of a handful" did make me feel somewhat like they were treating me as a plant or an animal.

"Right, but she's already engaged. And the party will be full of attractive young ladies, so there's no need for Lord Cedric to just make do with whoever's already on hand. He'll be able to pick and choose."

“But think about his upbringing! All those young ladies from noble houses are so snooty and pretentious. Do you think they want HIM as a marriage partner?”

“I wonder how much that really matters. Noble families make a big song and dance about that kind of thing, but in the end, Lord Cedric’s the heir to an earldom, isn’t he? So marrying him will make you a countess, right? Who’d complain about that?”

“Yeah, he is the heir...for now. His relatives have a few things to say about it. People like Lord Patrice who keep trying to convince the master and mistress to change their minds.”

“I wish it was all just words,” said one servant in a hushed tone, “but...I was there when a plant pot fell toward Lord Cedric while he was out walking. I saw it.”

All eyes fell on her.

“What are you talking about? I haven’t heard about that.”

“It was about a week ago. He was walking by the eastern side of the house, where not many people go. I was in the corridor on that side so I looked out and saw him every so often. Then a plant pot fell toward him from up above! Luckily it didn’t hit him, but why did something like that fall from there in the first place? It was pretty shocking!”

“Yeah! Who’d even put a plant pot somewhere like that! It’s not safe! ...So where did it fall from, anyway?”

My ears pricked up. They continued chattering away while washing the dishes, and I contributed so that I could listen in without being noticed. They were so absorbed in their gossiping that they didn’t realize I was an outsider. *I had better be exceptionally careful that I don’t break any plates. Oh, this one has such an adorable pattern with little violets!*

“The balcony on the second floor, I reckon. There are decorative plants inside the room, and sometimes they’re moved outside to the balcony so the sun will catch them. Not that they’d normally fall down from there, though. Who’d ever put any of them on the railing?”

At this question, everyone shook their heads in disbelief.

“No one would do a silly thing like that! Even a child would know how risky it is!”

“If it’s just to catch the sun, there’s plenty of space on the balcony without using the railing! But does that mean...they dropped it on purpose? They were trying to hit Lord Cedric!?”

“I’ve been wondering that myself.”

All of them spoke in a whisper, as if this were the most closely guarded secret. However, their voices were also loud enough that anyone in the room could easily hear them. It seemed their curiosity took precedence over their concern for Lord Cedric’s safety.

“That was a pretty busy day. Lots of other relatives here, I remember. I think any of them could have done it.”

“Ooh, that’s a scary thought. You’re saying someone wants to get rid of him?”

“When a fortune like this is at stake, I bet lots of people would come after him. Lord Henri died without any children, so they were all hoping they’d have a gold mine falling into their laps. Then along comes this grandson out of nowhere. Very frustrating, I’ll bet!”

“So who do you think it was? I say Lord Patrice is the most suspicious. He’s the one who always seems angry about the whole thing.”

“I don’t know, have you seen Lord Guillaume when he starts ranting about Lord Cedric? He gets a pretty frightening look on his face.”

“But Lord Patrice is clearly after the fortune! I see him sometimes, just standing outside the collection room and staring at the door. He’s got this look in his eye, like he wants it all for himself. Even though he can’t get in—the door’s locked of course—there have even been times he’s stood there rattling the doorknob. It’s truly wretched, I tell you.”

“Those greedy sisters seem to have sticky fingers as well. They’ve been stealing the mistress’s brooches and rings. I’ve seen them stashed away in their own jewelry boxes. I was worried I’d be accused of thieving them, and that would be JUST what I need... So I told Jeanne, but apparently they’d given some excuse about just borrowing them for now! I can’t believe that—are they asking

the mistress to lend them something different every day!? Maybe they don't teach nobles that if you sneak something away without asking, that's called stealing."

"Speaking of which, Lady Morin's had sort of a suspicious look on her face and all..."

Thus followed a stream of comments, none of them flattering, about the behavior of various relatives who'd been visiting the manor. You might be wondering why all these nobles had carelessly let themselves be seen acting suspiciously, but in truth, there was nothing odd about it at all. Having servants at a noble residence is a matter of course, and the larger the family's fortune, the greater their number grows. If a maid is working nearby, they have a tendency to ignore them, seeing them as merely part of the scenery. *Although you'd think that if they were visiting another house, they'd know to be on their guard and not do anything suspicious.*

I hope my own behavior isn't attracting too much attention. The servants at my house are used to my eccentricities by now, but I'd do well to be on my guard while I'm visiting someone else's house. I should ensure that no one sees me writing down things that I'm fangirling over, for example.

Equally, I was grateful to have this opportunity. There were mountains of intriguing tidbits wherever I looked.

I kept listening, scrubbing a dessert knife as if it were a sword. Amid the sea of voices sharing secrets and critical comments, a lone young woman chirped up with, "I'm wondering about Lady Monique."

Another servant nearby screwed up her face and gave a cry of disbelief. "The young mistress!? What would she ever do? What difference does it make to her who the heir is?"

"You're not wrong there," replied the one who'd suggested the idea, "but I'm starting to think it's not Lord Cedric himself she doesn't like, but *anyone* who's going to be the heir."

"What do you mean by that?"

This was a new and intriguing suggestion to me as well. I listened intently.

“The young mistress is in a bit of a bad spot, not having any children. It must be quite awkward for her that whoever the heir turns out to be, they sort of jump in front.”

“Hmm, yeah. I do see your point.”

“She’s feeling quite uncertain, I reckon. She’s lost her own position. Have you noticed how her face has been like a thunder cloud ever since Lord Cedric arrived? I’m worried about her. She must be tormented by thoughts about all this, day and night.”

“The master’s not exactly kind and gentle to her, after all. And the mistress doesn’t do much to stick up for her either.”

“Lord Henri was the only one who did, wasn’t he? And he was so good, he didn’t even have a bit on the side. What a shame that he died so young!”

“It’s a tragedy, that’s what it is. If only Lord Henri was still here... But if Lord Cedric died now, someone would come to take his place, wouldn’t they? I doubt it would make a difference to the young mistress. She’s not in the line of succession either way.”

I reflected on what I’d seen the night before. Lady Monique had walked past Lord Cedric’s door and glared at it with a dour expression. I hadn’t seen her with anything resembling a cheerful face since the moment I’d arrived.

I wondered what would happen to her in the future. *Will she be allowed to simply stay living here, with this house? Or will she be forced to return to her original home?* Such occurrences are far from unusual. If a husband dies and leaves his wife without children, the widow is left in quite a weak position. Even if their in-laws are cruel to them, they’re in no position to defy them, nor is there anyone they can call on for support. It’s fairly common for them to choose to return to the comfort of their parents’ home.

Which is all well and good for people who don’t feel too strongly about the situation, but matters might not go so smoothly for someone who’s built up a great deal of dissatisfaction and resentment. The more I thought about Lady Monique and the mournful look on her face, the more it stood out to me.

As I stood there making a glass sparkle flawlessly, a shout came in my

direction. “You there! Take these to the banquet hall!” A large basket was placed in front of me, filled with tableware that had been cleaned.

Well, I have no choice but to play the part. I added my one final glass, then lifted up the basket. *My word, it’s heavy. I do hope I can manage this. It’s a long way to the banquet hall.*

“Stand up straight! What are you bending over for? You’d better not drop that basket! If you break anything, that’ll be YEARS of your wages gone in a flash!”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

I stifled a groan. *For something this heavy, wouldn’t you ask a man to help?* With an intense degree of effort, I carried the basket out of the room.

As I left, I heard another brief exchange.

“Who was that, anyway?”

“Huh. I have no idea.”

I climbed from the kitchen downstairs to the first floor and proceeded in the direction of the banquet hall. I encountered quite a number of servants along the way, but not one of them offered to help—rather, I was met only with looks that suggested this was my problem, not theirs. *But perhaps it’s not that they’re cruel and heartless. In all likelihood, a servant is expected to be able to deal with this weight.* It was only with this new first-hand experience that I began to understand just how hard a servant’s job is. *I’ll have to show mine a bit more gratitude when I get home.*

Not far now, I thought, but my arms were already at their limit. I was about to take a momentary rest to prevent myself from simply dropping the basket on the floor, when suddenly all the weight mysteriously disappeared from my arms.

Thoroughly taken aback, I looked up. The one holding the basket—with a look of vexation—was Lord Simeon. “What on earth are you doing?”

“Well done, Lord Simeon. I’m impressed that you realized it was me.” I rubbed my arms and breathed a deep sigh of relief. *My muscles are definitely*

going to be sore tomorrow.

“I was wondering where you’d gone, so naturally I...” He paused. “Marielle, did you bring those clothes with you?”

“Of course. Do you think I’d just come to stay here without making any plans in advance?”

He let out a deeply exasperated sigh.

“I mean it, though,” I continued. “You did very well to notice me.”

“I am used to noticing things. I draw on my experience of spotting insects in the forest.”

Insects? Intriguing. Did he used to collect insects as a hobby? “But I’m somewhat impressed with you, as well. You’re able to blend in artfully wherever you go. If you were a man, I’d encourage you to become a secret intelligence operative.”

“A secret intelligence operative! Now that would be most delightful. How exciting! I’m quite certain that’s my calling. Won’t you employ me?”



“No.”

I groaned beseechingly. “Then I’ll just have to ask the Captain...oh, or perhaps His Highness!”

“No, I tell you! And you had better not ask the Captain. I fear he’d find it a very entertaining idea and hire you for real!” As he ranted, Lord Simeon continued to carry the basket on my behalf. *I do find that aspect of gentlemanly behavior to be quite wonderful.*

But as soon as we entered the banquet hall, I received a loud telling-off from the senior maid who was managing all of the preparations. “What were you thinking, letting a guest carry that for you!? You’re bringing shame upon the master’s house!”

“I’m so sorry,” I whimpered.

“It’s quite all right,” said Lord Simeon. “This was my fault. Speaking of which, she’s actually—”

“No, please allow me to apologize,” said the senior maid. “These young girls are so rash and careless! I’ll let her have it later, I promise you that. I can only hope you’ll see it in your heart to forgive us.”

“Truly, it’s not a problem, only—”

“And you!” she yelled, turning her attention back to me. “Put that basket over here and go down to get the next one *this instant!* And if this happens again, I’ll have the mistress give you the sack!”

“Y-yes, ma’am!” I said, dashing off in the direction of the kitchen downstairs. “I’ll be right back!”

I heard Lord Simeon mutter under his breath, “How does she play the part so naturally?” Then he followed me a little ways out of the room and called after me, “Marielle, be back before lunchtime!”

After three trips back and forth, my arms were left thoroughly defeated, so I crept away and put my usual attire back on.

Being more than a little worn out, I went to take a brief respite in my room after lunch. To my surprise, Lord Cedric knocked at the door. “You must forgive

me for my excessive insolence in asking, but if you'd be so kind, I have a favor to ask of you."

"What might that be?" I asked.

"I have need of a dance partner while practicing. The party is only two days hence, and I fear I still have no confidence whatsoever."

He made the request in a charmingly awkward manner. I nodded with a smile, and the two of us made our way to the music room. Ensuring that we left the door open this time, we held hands and rehearsed the steps.

"You're much better than you think," I told him. "I don't think you'll have any problems at all."

"I wish I could be so certain. I'm constantly worried about when to take each step, and the more I think about it, the more tangled and clumsy my feet become."

"You seem to have already memorized the movements perfectly, so you just need to stop thinking so hard about it and allow yourself to be carried by the music. Your partners will also have plenty of experience on the dance floor, so you needn't worry."

This would be much easier with music, I thought, glancing around the room. A considerable number of instruments lined the room, including an impressive-looking piano. *How irritating that I can't play and dance at the same time.*

But then it occurred to me: *Doesn't Lord Simeon play the violin? Perhaps I should ask him.*

"My, my, you seem to be enjoying yourselves." As we were dancing in silence, the figure of Lord Patrice had appeared in the doorway. He positively spat out his mean-spirited words.

So, the man of many rumors is here once more. I wonder if his visit today is part of another attempt to persuade the earl to disinherit Lord Cedric.

"You've made quick work of charming the ladies," he continued. "Your lack of discretion seems befitting of your inferior birth. Nonetheless, I find your taste in partners to be...rather peculiar." He turned his cool gaze on me. "Evelyne and

Suzette have far more appeal. I wonder why he's set his heart on you, instead? Aha, perhaps a commoner would feel daunted by young ladies with beauty and charm. In that sense, you are far better suited to him."

"Your words are entirely unbecoming of a gentleman," Lord Cedric replied with an unusual degree of fortitude. He stepped forward as if to defend my honor. "If you must make insinuations about me, you could at least refrain from dragging her into it."

"Putting on airs again, I see. What's so wrong with simply stating the truth? I'm doing no more and no less than that."

"Miss Marielle is a kind individual with a clear sense of fairness and justice. You have no cause to slander her as you have."

"Ah, I see what you mean. She does seem the type to get overly familiar with the common folk."

"Overly familiar!? We were practicing my dance steps!" cried Lord Cedric. "I'm not used to them yet, so she agreed to help me as a favor."

But no matter how much he protested, Lord Patrice stayed the course and continued mocking him. He erupted into a particularly scornful laugh. "Quite the pretext for spending all afternoon together. If it were me, though, I'd be entirely dissatisfied with such an unappealing dance partner. Would that I were so easily pleased!"

"I'm quite happy for no one else to find my fiancée *appealing*," came a smooth yet somehow dread-inducing voice. Lord Patrice turned around in surprise and saw Lord Simeon behind him. "For you to be dissatisfied only means that I've no need to challenge you to a duel." A hint of a smile bloomed on his face.

There it is! That beautiful smile, soft and tender but with an intense coldness to it! That's my Vice Captain! I'm fangirling so hard, I could die! If only he had a riding crop in his hand, he'd be perfect!

"Or did both of you forget that she and I are engaged?"

Lord Patrice fell over himself to try and explain. "No, not at all, I, you see... I was just about to tell him how unpardonable it was to behave so intimately

with someone else's fiancée." *Such a barefaced lie! Not that the atmosphere between Lord Cedric and I was anything like that, regardless.*

"I see," Lord Simeon replied. "So you were just the older relative, giving a healthy warning."

"Y-yes, precisely! I wanted to caution him against any behavior that could lead to House Pautrier's esteemed name being dragged through the mud!"

"An admirable thought indeed. If he's in such dire need of a woman, I believe there's a place that specializes in them. What was it called again? Ah yes, Tarentule. You could tell him all about it."

"How dare you imply such—"

"Now, what was the name of the particular young lady there you have a fancy for?" He looked at me as he asked.

This is ALL information he heard secondhand from me! I replied, "Eugenie, I believe. With curly black hair and a beauty spot above her lips, yes? I hear she's very alluring indeed. As one might expect, you're a man of discerning tastes, Lord Patrice."

"What? How do you...? What!?" Lord Patrice trembled so hard, words could barely escape his lips.

Lord Cedric looked from him, to me, then back again, completely stunned.

I continued, "Since Tarentule likes to keep its accounting practices very clear and requires payment up front, no one with a light wallet can even get past the entrance. For you to visit so often, Lord Patrice, you must be very well-off indeed. And you even hand out impressive gifts, like...a necklace made of giant black pearls."

"H-how on earth do you...?" said Lord Cedric, just as taken aback as Lord Patrice by this point.

Lord Simeon was, no doubt, thoroughly rankled beneath his placid smile as well. Alas, that was the limit of my knowledge. The ladies of Tarentule never divulged their clients' secrets. I only knew about the necklace because I'd caught sight of it by chance. It had been left out, accompanied by a card from

the sender.

Such discoveries weren't a regular occurrence, so Lord Patrice appeared to be quite afraid of how much else I might know. He blurted out an excuse and made a quick exit.

I beamed at Lord Cedric, who was still dumbfounded.

"In the end," he said at last, "I was the one who needed someone to come to my defense. I'm grateful to both of you. Grateful, and apologetic." He lowered his head to both of us, smiling bitterly. "The timing of your arrival was impeccable, Lord Simeon."

"Didn't I tell you that we'd keep watch from a distance? Though it seems I was ultimately the only one who kept my guard up. The two of you appear to have been having a grand old time."

His blunt statement of displeasure took the smiles from both my face and Lord Cedric's. *Really, now! There's no need to be quite so sullen!* "Well," I began, intending to defend myself.

"If you have that much time to waste, I suppose there's no need for concern about any of this business after all. Let's go, Marielle." As he put an arm around me and moved to push me out of the room, I grew slightly flustered. "Wait! We haven't finished our dance practice!"

"I don't recall promising that we'd cater to his every whim. For him to ask you a favor that could just as easily be granted by a member of his family does not speak well of his character."

"Lord Simeon!"

But despite my protestations, he continued pushing me out of the room with great vigor. Amid the sounds of my own distress, I heard a quiet giggle behind me. I instinctively looked behind me at Lord Cedric, but his face was one of pure dejection. *Did I only imagine hearing laughter? After all, it would be a little strange for him to be laughing in this situation.* Lord Simeon appeared not to have noticed anything. He didn't turn his head for a moment, and merely continued on his warpath. I had an odd feeling that I couldn't quite put my finger on, but in the end, I didn't say anything.

Only when we had returned to the guest rooms did I raise my objections to Lord Simeon again. “Your words just now... You went too far!”

“When? At which point? You’re being far too kind to a man who’d use dance practice as a pretext to try to seduce someone else’s fiancée.”

“You’re reading ill intention into a situation where none exists. Lord Cedric wanted to practice dancing. That’s all.”

“And you’re giving the benefit of the doubt when it’s far from justified. You need to be more aware of your own position. For you to blithely accompany any man who asks you to spend time with him makes you look rather lacking in discretion, doesn’t it?”

I sighed deeply. *How am I to convince him when he refuses to see sense?* “Lord Simeon, try to think about this logically. Do we live in a world where gentlemen are lining up to seduce a lady like me? You’re being thoroughly paranoid. If he had his heart set on seducing a woman, he’d surely have asked Evelyne or Suzette.”

He paused for a moment, about to speak, but instead he looked me up and down, appearing to be deep in thought. All the while, he muttered things to himself like “I suppose, but...” and “Well, no, because...”

Inside I screamed, *You don’t need to spare my feelings! You can say it to my face. I’ve long since accepted it.*

At last he said, “Don’t you find it rather sad that you would say something like that about yourself?”

“Not especially,” I replied. “It’s the truth. I don’t mean it in a craven or submissive way. People are all unique—they have their own characteristics and their own tastes. Observing those differences is what brings joy to my life. It’s my *raison d’être*. I, too, am just one of many unique individuals. Don’t you find life much more interesting, knowing that such variety exists in the world? I also consider myself extremely fortunate—ecstatic, in fact—to have been rescued from a lifetime spent alone by meeting a man with eccentric enough tastes that he’d propose to me and provide me with such a happy engagement.”

“Well,” said Lord Simeon blankly, lowering himself into a chair, “I’m glad that

you find the situation so agreeable.” He pulled me by the arm and sat me down next to him. “I suppose I do have rather strange tastes...”

“I honestly believe that you do. I have no idea what terms my father could have offered you, but they were clearly convincing enough.”

“Terms?” he asked, looking at me and furrowing his brow. His cravat was slightly crooked, so I straightened it for him. *Yes, I thought, he’s a good man, day in, day out. Though I’d be fangirling over him far harder if he was wearing his royal guard’s uniform.*

“I can’t imagine my family was able to offer much, of course. We’d be unable to provide any kind of a substantial dowry. What could have seemed like a substantial enough benefit that you would agree to this?”

He paused a moment. “I don’t follow.”

“Whatever it was, it’s made me very happy indeed, but for you, it’s surely an engagement with very little profit in it? It’s quite a mystery to me. Where is the appeal?”

For another moment he said nothing. The ridges on his forehead grew ever deeper as he stared at me. *I may love his smile, but his frown is strangely wonderful as well.* Spellbound, I returned his gaze.

He pressed a finger to his temple. “And I am to understand that this is how you see the situation?”

“Well, yes. How else would I see it?”

His expression became intensely strained. Then, all of a sudden, his body came alive. With one vigorous motion, he moved intensely close to me.

“Marielle, there’s something I need to tell you!”

I squealed inside. His face was so near to me, so very near. His handsome features were right before my very eyes. The pressure was so intense. His broad shoulders were on the verge of landing right on top of me. It left me breathless. I was suddenly very aware of the immensity of this man’s body. *The Vice Captain... How imposing he is. I’m so giddy, I fear a nosebleed might be on the way. There’s just one thing... Only one way in which this doesn’t fully satisfy me!*

“Lord Simeon, if you’re going to bear down on me like that, please, *please* do it with a riding crop in your hand!”

“...What!?” He froze in a position that was just on the edge of knocking me over.

“I’ve always thought this, but when you hold a riding crop, it *perfects* you! It completes the picture of you as a black-hearted scoundrel! That one brutal prop that adds an impeccable finishing touch!”

“Who cares about that!?” he said, rapping me lightly on the head.

And that tiny motion was enough to make him fall on top of me.

I struggled to breathe. *H-he’s...heavy... He’ll crush me...* “Lord Simeon, your frame is...proving quite burdensome...”

“I must say, my tastes might be entirely *too* eccentric.” All the energy went out of him, and he let his entire body weight rest upon me.

I didn’t know men were this heavy. He is really, truly about to crush me. “H-heavy...”

“Where do I stray from the path? Is it purely that my preferences are too far out of alignment? It must be that. Yes, indeed, that must be the case. What else could it be?”

“Lord Simeon?” I asked, struggling to breathe. “What was it you wanted to tell me?”

“You think to ask that only now? It hardly matters anymore.” At last he lifted himself off of me, and I took a series of deep breaths. I felt rather like an ant that had just been stepped on.

He at last returned to his normal sitting position and watched with tired eyes as I put my hair and dress back into order. He sighed. “What am I to do?” Anguish appeared on his face, and that, too, had something of a sensual effect on me.

But what did I do to cause this? Did I say something wrong? Were the negotiations with my father really something that had to be kept a closely guarded secret at all costs? “Lord Simeon, does Father have something on you?”

Something compromising?”

“It’s nothing like that. And I’d prefer not to talk about it any further.”

Having forcibly cut the conversation short, he turned to face away from me. I tugged at his jacket.

“Lord Simeon, I have some new information. When I was listening in on the servants’ conversations, something stood out, and—Lord Simeon, listen to me!” But even as I called to him, he wouldn’t turn around. The Demon Vice Captain, known for his intimidating presence, was pouting like a child...and it seemed that recovering his good humor would be quite an ordeal.

Chapter Four

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. I chatted with the older residents and guests, I chatted with Cedric, and I even disguised myself as a servant again and did some more spying, so I was rather busy. During that time, and for most of the following day, I had very little idea of where Lord Simeon was or what he was doing.

On the morning of the day before the party, a messenger came to visit him, and no sooner did they speak to one another than Lord Simeon left the manor. I suspected it might have been some emergency or other related to the Royal Order of the Knights, but I couldn't be sure. Even when he was around, I hardly laid eyes on him. Once in a while we'd encounter one another by chance, but his presence wasn't something that could be relied on—he was there one moment, gone the next.

Knowing him, I assumed he must have some business he was attending to, but I had no idea what it might be.

Just when I was wondering if he might be back soon, I saw a man at the foot of the stairs and said hello to him. Initially I'd thought it was Lord Simeon, but I immediately realized my mistake—it was Lord Patrice. *No surprise that he's here today, too*, I thought. However, curiously enough, he ran away in something of a panic.

I gave chase, and saw him enter a rather small parlor. Having confirmed the room he was in, I rushed out into the garden. Given all my time spent prowling around the manor and grounds, I knew my way around by now. I positioned myself outside the window of the parlor and stealthily peered in.

Facing Lord Patrice was a man I didn't recognize. At a glance, he did not have the air of a nobleman about him. He was likely a middle-class man. He was middle-aged, too, with a protruding belly and a dignified presence.

The window had been opened just a smidgen for ventilation purposes. Fortunately they made no move to close it due to the cold temperature, so I

stayed in the shadow of the curtains and listened in.

“It is entirely unacceptable for you to have come here! This is not my house!” Despite his enthusiastic words of protest, Lord Patrice kept his voice measured. He evidently had no wish to be overheard. Fortunately for me, he seemed too preoccupied to think about the window.

“I know that’s what you told me, but whenever I go to your residence, you’re not there. It’s quite inconvenient for me to have no opportunity to talk to you.” The other man came across as thoroughly fed up, with a hint of contempt toward Lord Patrice.

However, the latter showed no sign of taking offense at being disrespected. In fact, he came across as humble and inferior in his response.

“I’ve told you, I just need to beg your patience a tiny bit longer! I’m on the verge of having the money ready. I’ll be able to pay it off in full.”

“I’ve heard you say that many times before,” came the reply. “How long is ‘a tiny bit longer,’ exactly? When, specifically, will you have the money? I can’t wait any longer.”

Aha. So this man is collecting a debt? Perhaps the reason Lord Patrice is visiting so often is to avoid running into him.

“The day after tomorrow—no, the day after that! Please, just give me three days. In three days’ time, I’ll go straight to your shop.”

“Will you? If you say that and leave me empty-handed again, I really will have to send the bill to your parents this time.”

“I know,” said Lord Patrice, a frantic sense of urgency in his tone. “I will pay you in three days, no matter what, I promise you. So don’t tell anyone—my parents, my brother, or my great aunt and uncle. Please.” For a man who’d acted so high and mighty toward me and Lord Cedric, he cut quite a pathetic figure in the face of his creditor.

This exchange was quite unlike the stories one hears of debt collection. There was no abusive language, no threats of violence. Instead, the man reluctantly nodded. He ultimately came across less as a moneylender and more as some kind of tradesman. *Come to think of it, I wonder if Lord Patrice has paid off the*

cost of that necklace? The one made of black pearls. To look at it, it must have cost tens of thousands of algiers.

“Very well,” said the man. “But this is the very last extension. I will expect you at my shop before noon in three days’ time. If you don’t keep your promise, then...you know what will happen.”

“Believe me, I know!”

I saw that they were starting to leave the room, so I hurried back to the front garden. Rather than heading to the entryway, however, I crossed the front garden, aiming for the gate. I was surprised and alarmed at what a distance it was. At my own home, reaching the front gate would have taken no time at all.

I hid in the shadow of a statue near the gate and waited for the visitor to come out. Since he’d been led from the front door into that parlor, it seemed unlikely that he would leave by the back entrance. I was certain that if I waited there, he’d have to walk past eventually.

Sure enough, the man walked by only moments later. He appeared to have no attendants with him, and no carriage, which seemed slightly at odds with his upstanding appearance.

As he walked by my shadowed corner, I called out to him. “Excuse me. I don’t suppose you have a moment?”

He turned his head, looking back at me with rather a puzzled expression. Then he greeted me with a slight bow and came closer.

“I’m...sort of related to the family, you see, and...I happened to overhear your conversation with Lord Patrice just now.” Although I was in fact a complete stranger and only visiting the house, I thought it best to brush that under the carpet and present myself as a relative. “Do I understand correctly that Lord Patrice has an unpaid debt? He seems to be causing you a great deal of trouble, so I’m a little concerned.”

He made a sound of acknowledgment. “Yes, he owes me rather a lot. I delivered a necklace worth twenty thousand algiers, but he hasn’t paid me even a single algier for it. It’s been more than a month now since the date we agreed upon, and he just keeps telling me to wait a little bit longer, a little bit longer.”

“Oh my,” I replied. *It’s just as I thought. He has no money, but he lives beyond his means. Or perhaps his Tarentule favorite is so demanding, he feels FORCED to live beyond his means. Maybe she uses her wiles to coax him into buying her gifts. Oh, how I wish they’d teach me their techniques!*

I put my hands on my cheeks, and said in a very troubled manner, “I can’t believe it. What a vast sum of money!”

“He says he doesn’t want anybody he knows to know of it, so I’ve done my best to consider his needs. I didn’t even use a carriage to get here. Nonetheless, I’ve once more been turned away empty-handed. He said he’ll pay me in three days, but I’m skeptical.” He adjusted his hat and looked at me with pointed eyes. “If you’re a relation, perhaps you can do something. I’m a tradesman, so if I don’t get the money, it’ll cause me quite some difficulty. And if he really doesn’t have the money, the least he could do is return the necklace! Could you please try talking to Lord Patrice about it?”

I doubted Lord Patrice would be able to get the necklace back. It was no longer in his possession, after all. Going to Tarentule and asking Eugenie to return it would be too shameful to imagine.

“I’m truly sorry. I, too, would be unable to muster such a large sum of money at short notice, but I will try to talk to the head of our house. I’ll have Baron Bernier keep Lord Patrice on a tight leash so he doesn’t abscond.”

Having heard me say roughly what he was hoping, the man breathed a sigh of relief. *For a tradesman, unpaid costs are a matter of life and death. Of course he’s worked up about the threat of not recovering twenty thousand algiers.*

“If you don’t mind,” I added, “would you be able to show me the contract? I’d like to confirm it with my own eyes, just in case.”

“Certainly. It’s right here.” Having suddenly become very agreeable, he reached straight into his bag and withdrew a piece of paper. It was a sale contract with Lord Patrice’s signature on it. The other party was listed as Plunkett Co. Far from being a small or medium-sized company, it was an extremely well-known jewelry firm.

I asked the man’s name, and he told me it was Danton.

“Is this Lord Patrice’s handwriting?” I asked next.

“Of course.”

I paused for a moment. “I see. Thank you for the confirmation, I really appreciate it.” I handed the contract back to him. After one more promise that I would definitely talk to the earl, Mr. Danton and I parted ways. Then, in a terrible hurry once more, I returned to the manor.

I caught sight of the butler and asked him if Lord Simeon had returned already. Apparently he had, so I headed to the guest rooms on the second floor. Alas, I saw no sign of him there. I searched high and low, wondering where on earth he could be. After asking every servant I could find, I finally located him. Sweating too much for the season, and thoroughly out of breath, I went to the room I’d been told.

There I heard the high-pitched ring of garish laughter.

“Oh, Lord Simeon! You are far too clever!”

“But city society must be full of beautiful young ladies telling you that. We must seem so disappointing in comparison!”

Through the open doorway, I could see Evelyne and Suzette’s brightly colored dresses. Lord Simeon was sitting at the table with them, smiling most pleasantly indeed while they gazed at him hungrily and the three kept up a lively discourse.

“Not at all,” he told them. “Ladies who have beauty and nothing else are ten a penny, but ones that are pleasant to spend time with are surprisingly rare. It’s not so easy to find a truly amiable woman.”

Listening to him speak so sweetly, I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. *What am I seeing here? He’s never in such high spirits!*

Why was Lord Simeon talking to the sisters in such a buoyant manner? Why was he enjoying their company so much?

“But you have a fiancée, don’t you? How do you feel about her?”

I heard Suzette’s searching question and waited for the answer with bated breath. There might have been a tiny pause, but he answered little more than a

second later, his tone remaining entirely even.

“Our first meeting was after the engagement was already arranged. It was her father I discussed the matter with.”

My legs trembled. Slowly, steadily, I moved away, careful to ensure they didn't see me.

I'd known from the start, of course. Our marriage was purely political. His formal proposal came on the day we met, but at that point the agreement was essentially finalized already.

I'd kept my expectations in check. I fully understood that what he wanted wasn't me, it was “the daughter of House Clarac.” I'd warned myself of this over and over. I knew that Lord Simeon would never dream of being interested in someone like me.

He'd treated me with kindness, but it was a mere formality. We were an engaged couple, and he played the part to the fullest. After all, he was a very serious person. He couldn't help behaving in a sincere and faithful manner.

I'd never forgotten, not for a moment, that he was only doing his duty as a fiancé. I couldn't let myself confuse that with any notion that I was special to him.

...But if I knew that, why has this hit me so hard? Especially now, after all this time? Is it purely because I'm hearing the words from his lips for the first time?

“So then you just ran away?” said Isabelle, the red-headed member of my favorite trio, in a lightly mocking tone.

“My, my, my!” said Chloe, the blonde member. She laughed at me with the kindly eyes of a parent whose child had made a silly mistake.

“Tell us more about those two sisters,” said Olga, whose glossy brown hair was loosely tied atop her head. “What are they like?” The strands of hair resting against the nape of her neck were unbearably seductive.

Surrounded by the Three Flowers, I felt welcomed into a warm and comfortable embrace. Talking to them felt very soothing. “They're...rather

attractive. And they appear to have a very strong interest in men who fit that description.” I tried to answer their questions as neutrally as I could, but I couldn’t resist adding a snide remark. *This is no good at all! I didn’t mean to be badmouthing them!* I knew that the more I tried to cast aspersions on them, the more it would lower me to their level. And yet, when I thought back to that scene, I couldn’t stop the bleak sensation from welling up in my heart once again.

I found it less than pleasant that I couldn’t enjoy watching from a distance as usual. I had a distinct sense of self-loathing. *In the end, perhaps I’m the one with a defective personality, not them.*

The Three Flowers had kindly offered me tea. I lifted the cup to my lips, hoping a sip or two would calm me down. As one might expect from a peerless establishment like Tarentule, the tea was highly fragrant, with a taste that was mellow, yet deep and rich. The highest caliber of leaves had been brewed using the high caliber of techniques. Even at a nobleman’s residence, you’d be hard pressed to ever find tea of this quality. The ladies here didn’t only have the skills you’d expect. Clearly, they were also thoroughly trained in the art of tea making.

After impulsively running away from the earl’s estate, my legs had taken me to Tarentule almost subconsciously. In situations such as these, I could always rely on either my best friend Julianne or the Three Flowers. I’d chosen the latter without a moment’s hesitation, probably because I’d decided, somewhere in the recesses of my mind, that they’d have more knowledge to offer when it came to relationships between men and women.

And they showed no sign of my uninvited visit being an inconvenience to them. They met me willingly, and listened to my sad tale in Olga’s personal room, rather than one frequented by clients. I wouldn’t say that every single word out of their mouths was one of comfort, but they accepted me warmly, as if my being there was a matter of course. Even though all I came to do was complain about my life, they remained cheerful, and the atmosphere of the room slowly but surely lifted my spirits.

It won’t do to be heartsick forever, I thought. I must try to cheer up quickly. Why, right before my very eyes are these three goddesses from heaven! I

wondered how many people in Lagrange had experienced this most luxurious pleasure of having these three—who bloomed most proudly amongst all the flowers of Tarentule—all to themselves.

We four had an uproariously fun time chatting together. They even taught me a few tips about skincare. *Later, I thought, I'll have to try and capture this feeling of happiness in my manuscript. Frankly, in the face of all this joy, staying dispirited would be a crime.*

I decided to forget about my ill feelings. Hadn't I decided right from the start that I'd enjoy my marriage for what it was, political or otherwise? I tried to recall that initial feeling.

Noticing that I was back to my usual self, the Three Flowers began to ask me the questions that had clearly been gnawing at them.

"So, Agnès, why do you suspect Lord Simeon would do something like that?" said Isabelle, nibbling on the present I'd brought with me. Even though I'd rushed here without thinking, I still knew it would be the height of rudeness to turn up empty-handed, so I'd taken a brief detour to the very same shop where Lord Cedric had bought my present.

I put my cup of tea down and put a bonbon into my mouth. Bittersweet liqueur flowed out of the sugary chocolate coating. *This is the proper way to enjoy the finer things in life. By eating them delicately, not stuffing them all into your cheeks at once like some kind of fool.*

"Why?" I replied. "Well, isn't the obvious answer...because he found them charming?"

"You can't be serious! That knight is so unmoved by a woman's charms that when I tried to seduce him, he refused with such cool composure that I was almost offended. I'm Isabelle of Tarentule, and he refused me as if shooing away a cat."

"Oh, I'm...terribly sorry?" Hearing her indignant words, I felt a need to apologize.

"I thought he might not care for strong-willed women," said Chloe, who puffed out her cheeks in an adorably cute fashion, "so I tried the sweet and

innocent approach. All I got in return was a face that said he had no patience for me whatsoever—nor any desire to pretend otherwise. It was quite rude of him, honestly.”

I lowered my head. *Lord Simeon, you could at least try to be polite. But wait, does that mean the Three Flowers each tried to seduce him, one after another? If so, then what was Olga’s approach?*

Already a step ahead, Olga smiled meaningfully. “I’m apparently not to his taste either, I’m afraid.”

“Oh,” I replied. “Then he must be rather picky.” *So even Olga, the mature, intellectual type, wasn’t for him. But if he can be approached by all three of them without showing any sign of interest at all...doesn’t that make him rather odd? I’m not even a man, and I find myself ever so close to being drawn in by them. Who on earth DOES Lord Simeon have a taste for?*

He really seemed to have no particular taste at all—to such a degree that it could hardly be explained away as nothing more than a straight-laced attitude.

Is there really no one that excites Lord Simeon’s interest? What kind of person would actually draw his eye?

There was one person who suddenly came to mind. *But...it couldn’t be, could it? Is it really possible?*

The shock pulsed through me as if I’d been struck by lightning. I might have realized something truly inconceivable. The doubts I’d had until now were resolved in an instant. *I can’t believe it...but it must be true, it has to be!*

“Someone who wasn’t swayed by me couldn’t possibly be drawn to those sad little country bumpkins,” said Isabelle. “If he is, I’ll never forgive him.”

“I don’t see him as someone with such a bad eye for character,” said Olga.

“But if he did have a bad eye for character,” said Chloe, “wouldn’t he be even less likely to be interested in them? He’d like us, instead. We at least have some experience, not like those girls. We’re the obvious choice.”

Chloe is awfully confident in herself, I thought, listening to her theory. But what she said was perfectly correct. For any normal man, that would definitely

be the case.

And yet, I didn't feel comfortable dismissing them purely for being raised in the countryside. *I'm sure there are plenty of men who are drawn to that unsophisticated nature that city girls lack. They might have a certain naive innocence.* But did the Le Comte sisters actually have that kind of appeal? At the risk of being rude, it was hard to say that they did.

I thought back to dinner on the day we'd arrived. They'd tried to invite Lord Simeon to join them on an outing, and he flat-out refused them. He had honestly shown no sign of harboring any interest in them whatsoever. Despite this, today he'd been engaged in spirited and cordial conversation with them, which, now that I thought about it, seemed incongruous in the extreme. With this additional detail in mind, Lord Simeon's behavior was clearly inconsistent.

Why hadn't I realized it right away? I'd foolishly taken the scene at face value, then run away without thinking. Then I'd forced people with no involvement in the situation to listen to my complaints. I groaned internally. *How embarrassing. I'm so sorry!*

I apologized out loud, and jolly laughter rose from all three of them.

"No need for that! This was quite a rare opportunity for us, so it was definitely worth it," said Chloe.

"It was a relief to see that you have the same feelings as a normal person," laughed Olga.

"If you'd seen something like that and not been bothered at all—if you'd just found it interesting—then there'd really have been no helping you. We were wondering if your fiancé was truly nothing more to you than reference material." Isabelle's words startled me a little. Beneath her bubbly tone, I sensed that she was testing me, looking for confirmation.

So that's how I've come across to them. Well, I can hardly deny it. Usually, all I care about is fangirling over him and taking inspiration for my writing. If I never confront him on a serious level, I can hardly object to being accused of that very thing.

I tried to tell myself that I hadn't meant to treat him purely as reference

material, but looking back at my own behavior, my argument wasn't exactly persuasive. Perhaps that was exactly why Lord Simeon had been so grumpy as of late.

"Agnès," Olga began, reaching out with her pale hand and softly caressing my cheek. Her fingers were perfectly groomed right to the very ends of her nails, and they touched me almost with the tender loving care of a mother. "As with anything, too much can be poison, but...a moderate amount of jealousy is a spice that makes love even more delicious. There's no need for you to reject the way you feel. In fact, knowing that you're jealous would probably make Lord Simeon quite happy."

"I'm...jealous?" I asked, hesitantly.

"Am I wrong?"

I paused. "No, you're not." As she stared at me, her eyes a deep and intense hue, I grew embarrassed and looked away. My cheeks flushed bright red.

It seemed impossible that I could call myself a romance author, and yet find myself in this situation. Though I'd fought against it, and struggled to admit it, I knew the truth. *Yes! I'm burning with envy!*

I didn't like seeing Lord Simeon smile at other women, especially women who were obviously seeking his heart. Of course it upset me to see him sharing a table with them, appearing to be enjoying himself. Of course that would be a severe shock to me.

It was meant to be nothing more than a marriage of convenience. I was fully aware that I couldn't expect him to love me. I'd thought that even if he had a relationship with another woman, I'd have no choice but to tolerate that.

And at first, that had been quite all right with me. I was in pursuit of my own form of happiness, and our engagement allowed for that, so I'd accepted it as a give-and-take relationship.

At what point did I begin to feel like this instead? Lord Simeon is just far too wonderful. He's always kind to me, and even in those moments when he scares me a little, I find him attractive. He's so sincere and honest that I know I can trust him unconditionally. Sometimes he acts like a fool, but there's something

thoroughly cute about him in those moments as well. Even as he reacts with exasperation to my interests, he doesn't make a mockery of them.

And that was why...I fell in love with him from the start. I just didn't realize it until now.

It wasn't enough for our relationship to be a mere formality. No matter how hard I tried to deny them, or ignore them, I couldn't do anything to fend off the feelings that had built up inside me.

But it will be a one-sided love. I'm in love with him, but all that leaves me with is the painful reality of the situation. After all, I knew well and good that my feelings would never be returned.

The Three Flowers each rapped me gently on the head. Their soft giggling tickled my ears.

It seemed that even worries and pain were things they could take in stride. I was sure that they, too, had all sorts of feelings they kept hidden from other people. But they didn't let it show in their bearing at all, instead blooming proudly at every moment, their faces beautiful and beguiling. That was their *raison d'être*, I supposed.

Every time I saw them in full bloom, I was amazed all over again. They were an example I wished I could live up to. *Oh, if I could even be a common field flower blooming at their feet... But that's why I mustn't avert my gaze from this situation. I, too, have to hold my head up high and keep looking forward.*

"You seem to have recovered," said Olga, "but I'm curious as to what you'll do now."

I took a moment to organize my thoughts, then replied, "When I get back, I'll talk to Lord Simeon. I have some information I need to share with him."

"You're not going to press him about this? About catching him in the act of being unfaithful?" asked Isabelle teasingly.

With a strained smile, I replied, "He wasn't being unfaithful. But you're right. If possible, I would like to ask him about his true intentions."

"And how will you get your revenge on the interlopers?" asked Chloe.

This question was not so easy to answer. “Revenge? I’m not sure that’s entirely necessary.”

She did not seem pleased with this answer. She puffed out her cheeks and glowered at me. “What kind of a milquetoast answer is that? If someone’s trying to steal your suitor, you need to REALLY show them what’s what.”

“Saying that is one thing,” I stammered, “but I’m not sure I have the stomach for a revenge scheme... That’s not really who I am...”

The three of them exchanged purposeful glances and all reacted at once.

“Ugh!” said Chloe, indignant.

“My word,” said Olga, eyeing me calmly.

“Hmm,” said Isabelle, finding the whole thing very amusing.

And yet, despite their varied reactions, in that instant I found all of them somewhat terrifying.

Then Olga asked, “The party is tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I replied, full of trepidation. I’d have loved to know what meaning lay behind her smile.

“Perfect,” said Chloe. “I’m free tomorrow.”

“I have no plans either,” said Isabelle.

“And I... Well, I suppose I could ask Mr. Delerue to delay our appointment by one day.” *Delerue? She can’t mean the noted businessman and multimillionaire!?* *Is Olga really going to delay an appointment with someone that influential? Can she do that!?* “We’ll be there tomorrow, so make sure our arrival is expected at the earl’s estate!”

I tried to raise an objection, but I was summarily ignored.

“I wonder what we should wear. Agnès, can you tell me what kind of dresses those sweet little kittens tend to wear?” asked Chloe.

The sense of adventure in her eyes was slightly alarming. “Chloe, why are you making that face?”

“It’s quite all right,” said Isabelle, “you can leave it all to us. We’re

professionals, after all. We'll make sure everyone is sufficiently surprised!"

"Why won't you tell me what your plan is!?"

"It will be fun to surprise Lord Simeon, too," said Olga. "It's no fun unless we keep it a secret!"

"Please," I cried, "what are you going to do!?"

All I got in return was a smirk—three smirks, in fact.

"We'll never tell!"

"Our lips are sealed!"

"We'll see you tomorrow!"

Their faces hinted at quite the prank. They each wore beautiful, dangerous smiles. I had the keen sense that they were toying with me, but as I looked at them, I still couldn't help feeling impressed.

After that, they quickly shooed me out of Tarentule, explaining that they had to start readying themselves for work. I walked toward the carriage street with a feeling that I was the victim of a team of mischievous fairies.

Speaking of which, I wonder if there's been any follow-up report about Lutin. I passed a newsstand and was instantly reminded of him. They weren't shouting any headlines to draw in customers, so presumably there'd been no new incidents. I picked out a selection of the day's newspapers and bought them, then hailed the fiacre that was just driving by.

I read the papers on the way, and soon arrived back at Earl Pautrier's manor. I greeted a servant as I walked in—and then Lord Simeon came to me quicker than I could even head to the second floor.

As soon our faces met, he rebuked me in a harsh tone. "Back at last, I see. Where on earth have you been?" I recoiled from him, and grew hostile at the same time. I'd finally cooled down, and now I was forced to remember all those horrible thoughts again. *He wasn't being unfaithful, I'm sure. But in any case, this isn't a relationship where you'd talk about infidelity as if it matters. Indeed, whether my fiancé is "faithful" or not, it makes little difference. I know that. At one point I even thought it was an entertaining prospect!*

"I was just visiting some friends," I replied. "But I ask the same of you, Lord Simeon. Where were you? When did you get back? I was here until shortly after midday, but I didn't see your face even once." The tone of the words I shot back at him was cutting indeed, if I do say so myself. I wondered if Lord Simeon knew that I'd seen him with the Le Comte sisters. If so, I expected this would be a rather embarrassing situation for him.

Sure enough, Lord Simeon was momentarily lost for words. However, seeing that he apparently had something of a guilty conscience, I suddenly felt unable to be honest with him. Instead all I said was, "I needed to talk to you about something, but you just didn't come back, so I decided to call on some friends instead."

"...I had a sudden pressing issue to attend to," he said at last. "What was it you needed to talk to me about?"

"It doesn't matter anymore. Sorry for bothering you when you're clearly busy."

Oh goodness, what am I saying? I have to tell him, I really do!

But since Lord Simeon made no effort to explain his behavior, I decided it wouldn't be worthwhile to put in all the effort from my side. I wanted to ask: *Where did you go this morning? Why were you spending time with the Le Comte sisters?* Internally, I debated whether I could bring myself to ask him directly...but I could not. *Never!* I thought to myself. *Of course I can't just say something like that!*

I left Lord Simeon where he was and went straight up to the second floor. He didn't follow me. Rather than being a relief, that just exaggerated my discomfort. *Maybe my attitude really is too objectionable to deal with. Is he angry with me again? Maybe he's ready to discard me and our engagement after all...*

It occurred to me that if I was considering that as a serious possibility, it would have served me better to simply be honest with him.

Ultimately, what I'd wanted was for him to run after me. I longed for Lord Simeon to chase me down and put everything he had into a full apology and explanation.

Which was ridiculous. Why would he see any need to do that?

In a rather downtrodden mood, I walked in the direction of the guest bedrooms. Along the way, who did I encounter but the Le Comte sisters? It seemed the two of them had been listening in on the exchange between Lord Simeon and myself. With faces that spoke of pure contempt, they looked at me and giggled to themselves. “Oh, had you run off somewhere?” said Evelyne. “It makes no difference whether you’re here or not, so I can’t say I even noticed.”

“Just imagine!” Suzette chimed in. “If you simply left and never came back, no one would even realize!”

They seemed awfully proud of themselves, as if celebrating a victory. I can’t say I didn’t bear them some ill will. A fair portion of it, in fact. And yet, knowing that the two of them weren’t really in a position to be laughing at me, I felt rather sorry for them as well.

“We had such good fun today,” said Evelyne. “What a shame that you missed it.”

“We met Lord Simeon for tea,” said Suzette. “The conversation was so enthralling that the time simply flew by! Lord Simeon is so full of interesting things to talk about. He didn’t leave us bored for a single moment.”

They continued their exchange, requiring no input from me whatsoever.

“He seemed to be enjoying himself as well, so the mood was very jolly indeed. Of course, we did wonder if it was cruel of us to monopolize him. He does have a fiancée...more or less.”

“But Lord Simeon didn’t mind at all! He said that the engagement was a mere formality, you see.”

“Oh well, I suppose I needn’t even ask if that’s a disappointment for you. Don’t you think it’s fruitless to try and push ahead with the engagement? It’s so clear that your partner hates you, so why even try? You’d be far happier if you married someone better suited to you.”

“If you can find anyone who fits that description, of course!”

They both left, laughing uproariously. I watched them go and wondered what

information Lord Simeon had been able to get out of them.

After all, having tea with them *must* have been with that purpose. The only other possibility I could think of was that he'd felt obliged to stay, but that seemed exceedingly unlikely.

I assumed they had *some* concerns other than fashion and suitors. I returned to my room, intensely intrigued to know what had been discussed.

As soon as I stepped inside, I froze in shock. On the table sat several boxes tied with ribbons. As I got closer, my gaze was drawn to the shop name engraved on the lid of each one. It was the same shop I'd been to earlier that day. I wondered what variety of treats awaited me inside. Bonbons, baked sweets, maybe even *marrons glacés*...

Is this to make up for the bonbons he ate? He did say he'd buy me some himself...

I knew who'd put them there without even asking. Inserted in each ribbon was a single rose. *Exactly the same thing he did before!* I couldn't help laughing slightly. *Maybe I should just give in and confess the truth. I prefer violets and lilies-of-the-valley.* And yet, recently I'd begun to think that roses weren't too bad either.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the closet and found my bag. I took out some writing paper and brought it back to the table. Then I moved the boxes of sweets into a corner and considered what I should write.

The easiest starting point was to express my gratitude for the presents. *Then, I thought, I have to report the new information I've gathered. That's the real matter at hand.* It was information that Lord Simeon absolutely needed to know. Mr. Danton, the jeweler, had visited Lord Patrice to get his money back...and that the signature on the contract between them was a perfect match for the handwriting on Lord Cedric's threatening notes. Those blocky letters were so distinct, there was no doubting it. I'd even double-checked the notes I'd borrowed from Lord Cedric, just to make certain. Provided that the signature truly was Lord Patrice's own hand, there was absolutely no other explanation: the one who'd written those notes was Lord Patrice.

There was still no evidence regarding the plant pot incident, but for me, the

whole business was settled. The person going after Lord Cedric was, indeed, Lord Patrice.

As for whether it was better to accuse Lord Patrice directly and start pressing him, or rather to try and corner him another way, I was happy to leave all that up to Lord Simeon. All I had to do for now was to ensure that the information I'd gained didn't go to waste. I had to convey it as thoroughly and accurately as I could.

Having written down all of that, and the details I'd overheard from the servants, I'd already filled five pages. I paused for now and read over what I'd written to check that I hadn't left out anything important. *What else do I need to include? I feel like there's something else I needed to cover...*

Then I realized what that was. I picked up my pen again, and added an apology.

Stepping softly, I left my room and stood before the neighboring door. Earlier I was quite sure I'd heard the sound of him returning.

Either way, I didn't have the courage to face him again just yet. I slipped my letter, which I'd folded into quarters, under the door. Or rather, I tried to, but it didn't fit. The wad of paper was simply too thick.

I suppose this was inevitable, since I wrote five pages. Perhaps it'll fit if I just fold it in half instead?

I picked it up and unfolded the pages once, then tried sliding it under the door again. I pushed it in with a great deal of force, and somehow I was just barely successful in pushing the letter into his room.

I returned to my room and waited. At last I heard some soft footsteps outside the door, and a small scrap of paper appeared from under it. I rushed to pick it up—it was small enough to fit in the palm of my hand.

I unfolded it and read the brief message. Seeing his words, written in his handwriting that I'd seen so many times, made all the tension release from my shoulders at once. Instinctively, I started beaming. *Tomorrow, I'll be able to look him in the face again and talk to him normally, just as we always have. I'm sure of it.*

I wrote a message back to him and slipped it under his door. “There are lots of things I want to ask you, and lots I want to tell you as well. When this is all over, I’d like it if we could find some time to talk.”

“Me too,” read his reply. “I sincerely apologize for today.”

Chapter Five

The fated afternoon arrived, and the Flowers arrived at the Pautrier residence just as they'd proclaimed.

The butler knew in advance—he'd heard about it from me, in fact—so he allowed the trio to enter. Still, it came as quite a shock that a group of such head-turning beauties were there with such a large number of suitcases. Even in their relatively reserved street clothes, nothing could hide their sheer radiance and charm. They were flowers in full bloom, just as their name suggested, brightening every room they entered.

"Thank you. Could you leave those over there?" said Chloe to a servant, directing him in a calculating manner. One flash of her smile, and the young man was so enchanted he could hardly bear to look at her. *Come now, I thought, don't go corrupting an innocent youth!*

Having noticed all the commotion, Lord Simeon was rather surprised as well. "What's going on?" He continued muttering to himself, and I heard a few words like "Why?" and "Here!?"

But before I had a chance to explain, the goddesses pushed him out of the room. Each of them spoke in turn.

"Your role in all this will come later, Lord Simeon! Be a good boy and stay outside."

"Peeking will only ruin it! Why spoil all the fun?"

"We have a big surprise in store, so just wait and see!"

The door was closed right in his face, while I was left behind, surrounded by piles of cases. Isabelle turned toward me. "Now, no time to be standing around! It's time to start getting everything ready!"

I decided I'd at least try to put up some perfunctory attempt at resistance. "Excuse me," I said, "would you mind taking a look at the dress I've been planning to wear?"

But I faced immediate, enthusiastic rejection. “Oh, there’s no need for that,” said Isabelle. “We’ve already decided not to use it.”

“Keep it in mind for another occasion,” said Chloe. “We’ve brought a complete look with us today.”

“Although,” Olga added, “if you’ve had a sudden epiphany and prepared a dress that’s really audacious, it wouldn’t hurt to take a quick look.”

I silently withdrew. *No, it’s nothing they’d call audacious. I just know what suits me and what doesn’t, all right?*

I groaned internally, fearful of the clothes they were about to put me in. Knowing them, they’d never dress me in anything that truly didn’t suit me...but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t push the envelope as far as they could dare.

Showy, flashy, loud... These were words that were diametrically opposed to my very being. *If I stand out, I just can’t relax! I’m normally a quiet creature, lurking stealthily in the shadows! If people notice me too quickly, I start to feel like my life is in danger!*

I trembled as the Three Flowers dexterously stripped me of almost all my clothes, leaving me in only my undergarments. They told me that they’d start with a skin treatment, although honestly, I didn’t feel I’d been neglecting my skin; I had a perfectly adequate everyday skincare routine.

“Basic skincare is one thing, and preparing for battle is quite another,” said Isabelle in response to my protestations. *Battle!? Am I marching off to the front line?* “A spectacular party is a lady’s battlefield. As well you know, I’m sure!”

I was instructed to lie face-down on a couch, then graceful fingers began to press into my body with a strength I’d never have foreseen.

“Hngh, ohhh, it hurts...” I groaned. But then suddenly it felt good. “Oh, right there! Right there!”

“I knew it,” said Isabelle. “You’re tensed up from all that time spent hunching over a writing desk.”

“We have to loosen you up or your looks will suffer. If your skin’s in bad condition, it can lead to premature aging,” said Olga.

“And bad posture alone can be enough to make you less attractive!” added Chloe.

I continued to moan as they massaged my body. I felt like bread being kneaded. And yet, that pleasurable pain sensation was a feeling I could definitely get used to. Particularly intense was the effect it had on the area around my shoulders and shoulder blades. I suppose all the tension was what you could call an occupational disease. They even told me about some flexibility exercises that I could do to reduce the prevalence of the issue.

“Did you and Lord Simeon make up, by the way?” Isabelle asked.

Between quivering moans I replied, “Y-yes, pretty much...” The vigorous pressure on my lower back took my breath away. It hurt, but it felt so good. *Yes... Just there... A tiny bit more...*

“Pretty much?” Chloe replied.

“That’s good, though,” said Olga. “Incidentally, it is nice that you’re so slim, but your body shape is somewhat lacking in variation.”

“Shall we pad out her chest a bit?” suggested Isabelle.

“I think it’s fine the way it is,” Olga replied. “A better approach for Agnès—or rather, Marielle, I believe we should call her here—would be to emphasize her dainty and waif-like figure.”

I chuckled inside. *Three very full pairs of breasts must be swaying to and fro above me. How disappointing that I’m lying face down, so I don’t get to see them. And how disappointing that I don’t have a pair like that myself! Woe is me.*

But, though I was suddenly very aware of my blood circulation, I had no time to focus on that. Next they covered me in rose oil before wiping my whole body with a cloth soaked in hot water. The faint scent of roses wafted from my piping hot skin, and I found myself even more entranced than before. *Considering how much money and effort goes into securing their services normally, it would have to be this incredible, I suppose!*

They dressed me in special undergarments just for the party, and then, at last, they told me to sit down in front of the mirror. A vast array of makeup

implements were laid out in a row before me. *Are all these really necessary? Normally I'd only use about a third of these!*

“Marielle’s main strength is her good skin,” said Chloe. “It’s silky smooth, and she has a lovely pale complexion.”

Isabelle replied, “Ah, the benefits of youth. I’m jealous that such a brief skin treatment produced such a fabulous result!”

“One’s teenage years are a dream that ends too soon,” said Olga. “You don’t realize how magical they are until they’re over, and then you can never have them back. Please, don’t waste them. Live these years to their fullest.”

Sharing words of praise, envy, and advice all at once, the three of them meticulously applied my makeup. I wondered, *Is it really going to work if they layer THIS many things on me all at once?*

Then Chloe asked, “What are we doing with her hair? It’s so beautifully straight, it would feel wrong to attack it with curling irons.”

“But it would be a shame to just leave it how it is,” Isabelle replied. “Her facial features are quite understated, so we should aim to have her hairstyle stand out.”

Olga contributed, “Why don’t we tie part of it up, then leave the ends loose, so there are wisps of hair swirling around her face?”

For the evening’s party, they’d not only brought a dress, but also styled my hair and applied all sorts of other finishing touches. At first I’d thought we were starting far too early, but by the time we were finished, it was just in time. It took significantly longer than I was used to, and by the time the Three Flowers gave their seal of approval at last, I was so distracted by my own appearance that I was left thoroughly dumbfounded.

Oh my. Makeup truly can work wonders.

The dress and the hairstyle made such an impact as well. I couldn’t believe what a different air I had about me. Compared to my usual self, it was as if I’d transformed into another person altogether.

The dress the Three Flowers had brought with them was pure white, almost

like a wedding dress. Layers of light chiffon and lace fluttered when I moved, with an effect akin to petals or butterfly wings. Rather than using any large quantity of jewels, both the dress and my hair were adorned with flowers in a variety of colors. Those too, however, were not big and ostentatious, but sweet and delicate. The blooms attached to the dress were artificial, but those in my hair were genuine, and amongst them sat a single rose, red and bold.

This addition was the one and only request I'd made. The other colors were more like pale pastel shades, so I felt this would be the perfect detail to tie the look together.

I wore earrings and a necklace just to maintain the minimum level of decorum, but they were discreet and moderate pieces, decorated with tiny pearls. As was the Three Flowers' calling card, the overall effect was polished and graceful. *Honestly, I thought, it feels odd to be praising my own appearance, but the complete effect is far more attractive than I'd have expected. It's quite a surprise.*

It was decidedly strange to be describing myself like that, but in truth, I didn't even see my own face in the mirror. I found myself thinking that before me sat a normal young lady—an attractive young lady. What I found most incredible was that after painting me so much, it in no way looked as if I was wearing heavy makeup. The result seemed entirely natural, despite being significantly more vivid, and cute, than I'd ever looked before. *What exactly did they use on me, and where? This isn't makeup so much as a disguise. It would even give Lutin, the master thief, a run for his money.*

It was a fascinating experience, seeing how much my appearance could be changed. *But now I have to go out in front of people looking like this. Will I be able to blend into the scenery as I normally do?*

I'm...scared...

Olga said, "Why are you trembling like that? Remember, posture is important!"

"Now, time to charge into battle!" Isabelle added. "You can't let yourself be beaten by those little upstarts from the country."

"We've done all we can to prepare you, so go out there and make the biggest

impression you can!" said Olga.

I hesitated a moment, which prompted the three of them to push me from behind all at once. I stumbled straight out into the corridor, where Lord Simeon awaited.

"Oho, in your uniform, I see!" said Olga, a measure of astonishment in her voice.

That prospect was a surefire way to capture my attention. I raised my head at once, and my vision was filled with the sight of a tall man in a royal guard's uniform.

Wow, it feels like forever since I've seen him in uniform! And this isn't even the usual one, but the extra formal one for special occasions! I'm seeing it for the first time ever!

Lord Simeon, you look...so...GREAT!

The uniform was shaped perfectly to accentuate his trained physique. As a whole, the look was austere, but what perfected it were the fine decorative details, brimming with style. And the aloof sharpness of his glasses, of course. I couldn't imagine seeing this picture and not having my imagination sparked into the realm of wondrous delusion. His face was the only bare skin on show, but that in itself gave rise to an indescribable sensuality. *Ohhh, how wonderful! His uniform is PERFECT, like a religious festival for my fangirl desires!*

In reality, I'd say the Vice Captain was *almost* perfect. Only one last detail was missing.

"Lord Simeon!" I began, drawing near.

"I'm not going to hold a riding crop." He shut me down before I could even ask. *But why!? When he's gone this far, why won't he add that one finishing touch just for me!?*

"Careful, Marielle!" said Isabelle, holding me back for a moment. "Don't get a nosebleed!"

The others added their own observations. "I suppose no makeover can change your nature," said Olga.

“Anyway,” said Chloe, “why not let Lord Simeon get a good look at you?”

Having calmed down my fangirl urges to the point that I was less likely to spontaneously die from them, the trio presented me to Lord Simeon again. He stared at me silently, his brow furrowed.

Chloe chuckled. “Well? So taken aback that you’re lost for words, it seems?”

“Perhaps he feels his love rekindled, seeing his fiancée looking so much more beautiful!” said Olga.

But despite their prompting, he still didn’t say a word. He adjusted his glasses and inspected me from top to bottom. I felt so uncomfortable that I longed to run and hide.

It didn’t exactly feel like a romantic response. Quite the opposite, in fact. All that emanated from Lord Simeon was a cold, intimidating feeling.

“Cat got your tongue?” said Isabelle to him mockingly. “Or too moved for words, perhaps?”

But my intuition was correct. He turned his icy gaze on her. “I was indeed rather surprised,” he said at last. “I didn’t even realize it was my fiancée at first.” *That’s just what I thought, Vice Captain! Isn’t it shocking that a person can be transformed like this?* “How exactly did you craft such an elaborate deception?”

“No need to phrase it so rudely,” Isabelle replied. “We simply changed her makeup technique. She tends to apply it with an overly light touch, so of course this looks strikingly different!”

“Striking indeed. Compared to her usual appearance, I feel rather as if I’ve been struck in the face,” said Lord Simeon.

Chloe raised an indignant protest at this. “What an obstinate fool. Your fiancée is dressed to the nines for you, and that’s all you can say to her?”

Olga smiled, a degree of irritation visible on her face as well. “Dresses and makeup are a woman’s battle attire. Everywhere you look in high society, this is how young ladies have prepared themselves for war. Isn’t it unfair for Marielle alone to be denied that opportunity?”

“I’m hardly denying her...” In the face of this censure from all directions, even Lord Simeon softened his tone somewhat. He averted his eyes, clearly uncomfortable.

The last thing I’d expected was for him to be overflowing with flowery words of admiration, but this response was still a little disheartening. *After all this effort, it truly makes no difference if I’m beautiful or not...*

“Then kindly refrain from continuing to blather on about it,” said Isabelle, her voice irate. “If you don’t get a move on, I’ll kick both of you to high heaven.”

Lord Simeon sighed and offered me his arm. I gently added mine to his and stood nestled up close to him as usual.

“...Thank you for all your help,” I said, glancing back at the Three Flowers. “I’m truly grateful.”

“If you’re thanking someone, do it with a happier face,” came the reply from Olga. “If you express your gratitude so despondently, how can you expect us to feel glad about it?”

I rushed to straighten my back and put a smile on my lips. *She’s right. After all they’ve done to help me, it’s rude for me to have such a negative attitude when addressing them.*

Chloe spoke next. “Listen to me, Marielle. Even when your hackles are raised, even when you want to cry, always return an easygoing smile to whoever’s responsible. No matter how harsh its environment, a flower always has to bloom beautifully. If it wilts and drops its petals, it’s no longer a flower, but mere detritus to be thrown away. Never forget that you are a flower.” She lightly flicked my forehead.

“Although,” added Olga, “I can understand that if your key ally is a fool who doesn’t appreciate beauty, it must be hard to work up any enthusiasm.” She didn’t forget to deliver a frosty glare to the person beside me.

Finally, Isabelle added, “But tonight, you’ll find yourself admired by people on all sides! Forget about the man next to you, just enjoy it for everything it’s worth!”

Her buoyant tone made me burst into a smile again. In contrast, Lord Simeon

began to pout sullenly. "Let's go," he said, starting to walk.

"Oh, y-yes," I stuttered, moving my feet to keep up. "We're off, then!"

All three of them replied at once. "Bye bye!" "See you later!" "Tell us how the battle goes!"

The goddesses waved us goodbye, and we proceeded to the banquet hall. For a while we somehow walked without saying a word, but then Lord Simeon cleared his throat rather forcefully. "I apologize for commenting as rudely as I did. Only, your appearance is so much more ostentatious than I'm used to, I was...how shall I put it? Utterly bewildered."

"Yes," I replied, "it was quite a shock to me, as well. I never expected that a change of clothes and a careful application of makeup could turn me into a different person."

"Well, when I said I didn't realize it was you, I was referring more to the air about you than anything else. You come across rather differently than usual, but if I look closely, it is indeed Marielle's face under all that paint."

His earnest, conciliatory tone made a smile form at the edges of my lips. *This is what I love about him. Sometimes he's a bit harsh, but he never bears me any ill will, not truly. He's just being his usual earnest self.*

"It's quite all right. For me, this is all rather exciting. It's as if I'm in disguise. I knew they were skilled, but it was remarkable to see their makeup wizardry up close. They showed me all kinds of techniques."

His light blue eyes finally turned to look at me again. When he saw the expression on my face, the tension in the air dissipated. "But why did you invite them? Why the dramatic change? I suppose you simply decided a change was in order?"

"No, I'm also rather baffled to have reached this point. When they and I were talking yesterday, this plan simply formed out of nowhere."

"Ah, so that's where you were yesterday?" he asked.

"Yes. I thought it best to restore myself to good spirits by spending time in a flower garden."

Lord Simeon appeared to be dismayed. Not that I'd expect him to have a positive view of me spending time at a brothel, of course. However, he was kind enough to understand that I'd made some wonderful friends with whom I could enjoy a comfortable discourse. He didn't object to it per se—he didn't want me to stop—but he was a little worried that others might find out.

It's all right, though. No one ever calls me Marielle at Tarentule, and the ladies are being especially attentive to make sure that there is no risk whatsoever of the information being leaked. That is the most fundamental aspect of their job, after all. No need to worry!

"We're just reaching the staircase, so watch your step. Can you manage it?" Since I'd removed my glasses, Lord Simeon escorted me with even more gentlemanly attention than usual.

"Thank you. My eyesight's not so poor that I can't see in front of me—nothing like that—so it's quite all right. It's only a shame that the faces around me will be something of a blur."

Being unable to see clearly left me decidedly uneasy. I was worried I wouldn't even know if the Le Comte sisters were approaching. *But I know Lord Simeon's arm will be there to lead me, so it will be all right.*

"Lord Simeon, how is your eyesight without your glasses?"

"I'm not so dreadfully short-sighted either, but it is more troublesome than I tend to enjoy dealing with."

That reminds me, I've actually never seen Lord Simeon without his glasses on. It doesn't bother me, since his glasses actually add to his appeal... Not like mine. I'd even say they're one of those essential props that make him so attractive. Right up there with the riding crop!

We gradually drew closer to the sounds of music and revelry. Once we'd descended the staircase into the entrance hall, we started to meet people who had only just arrived, and exchanged greetings with them as we made our way to the banquet hall.

Every one of them did a double take when they saw me. The layers of hushed voices built into a cacophony. "It's Marielle Clarac!" they said. "That's Marielle

Clarac! The one from your city, Marielle Clarac!" "It's not some unknown mystery girl, it's Marielle Clarac! Look carefully, her hair is the same color!"

When we entered the party itself, every pair of eyes in the room fell on me! Well, not quite. The only people who could see me were those nearby. But I'd had that same feeling before. I remembered it well. It was very much like the first time I'd appeared in public after becoming engaged to Lord Simeon.

Whispers and murmurs of "Who's that?" emanated from the assembled noblewomen. A few said things such as: "Her? It can't be!" Not only did they struggle to realize it was me at first, but even when they did, they did not appear to be fully convinced.

Lord Simeon's gallant apparel drew the eye as well, which made us the center of attention to an even greater degree. I fought with all my might to maintain my prim and proper countenance, while underneath I was in a cold sweat. I could have screamed. *I feel my chances of survival slipping by the moment! I want to go and hide in the shadows, right now!*

Since I definitely couldn't do that, priority number one was saying hello to our hosts. Lord Simeon and I made our way over to Earl and Countess Pautrier.

Lord Cedric was with them as well, of course, and he was equally surprised by my appearance. "My word, I hardly recognized you. You look like a fairy who lives in a flower garden."

"I am most grateful that you invited us, Lord Cedric. I must say that you, too, look especially like a proper young gentleman today."

Considering this was his debut and introduction as House Pautrier's heir, he seemed remarkably calm. He had a confident air about him, as if he did this sort of thing every day. He always came across as cultured and refined, which gave the impression that he was more than suited to being the heir to an earldom. The guests who were meeting him here for the first time all offered him words of praise as well, and their faces matched those words, even if they said all kinds of other things in far-flung parts of the room, or in the shadows of their hand fans. At the very least, however, there was no one who *openly* found fault with him.

His clothes, a lustrous shade of dark green, suited his lean and toned body,

and drew the eye even in a room full of ostentatious outfits like this. When Lord Simeon stood next to him, the two dashing handsome young men made a peerlessly dazzling impression. Their excellent physiques made them very attractive when viewed at close range or from afar.

Yes, indeed, I thought. When the two stand beside one another, it's clear that their body types are very similar. Lord Simeon was slightly taller, but otherwise they had several aspects in common. Broad shoulders, surprisingly muscled chests, biceps that visibly stood out even through the fabric of their clothes... Their formal wear had no unnecessary slackness in the material at all, but rather clung to their bodies, so all of these aspects were on clear display.

Does Lord Cedric have some background in martial arts? That would seem odd, since he said he had no experience with fighting. I doubt his body could be this honed simply by doing occasional exercise... When I think about Prince Severin, for example, he has a keen interest in horse riding and gets plenty of exercise, but his body is nowhere near the level of a knight's. His Highness has the same slim physique as any other gentleman of his age.

I wondered if physical labor could result in a physique like that. I still hadn't asked him in any great detail about his life in Linden. It was possible that he'd been engaged in that sort of work.

...And yet not only his physique, but his entire manner comes across too differently from any other manual laborer I've ever seen.

As part of my efforts to gather reference material, I'd spent more than a little time watching laborers working downtown. I'd gone on jaunts to various places accompanied by a manservant, my editor, and occasionally even my older brother. When I thought back to the manual laborers I'd seen in the past, Lord Cedric's entire demeanor was nothing like them at all.

No matter how one looked at him, he came across as no more and no less than a nobleman. This could have just been the result of the efforts he'd made to live up to his status as a suitable heir. Perhaps, I considered, he had inherited it from his father to an extent as well. Given the position he found himself in, it was definitely a desirable attribute for him to come across this way. However, there was something not quite right, and I couldn't put my finger on it.

He was beset by a sea of guests offering their greetings, so I wasn't able to engage in much of a conversation with him. Lord Simeon and I soon had to give way to other people and move somewhere else. The two of us also separated for a while. He sought out his own friends, and I was looking for someone as well. It was only natural for us to go our separate ways for a time.

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" he asked with an anxious tone.

I smiled back at him, and nodded. "I told you, my eyesight's not so bad that I can't see where my feet are stepping. There's no need for any concern."

"That's not why I'm concerned. You're going to look for Patrice, I assume. Why? What are you planning?"

Oops. He has me all figured out once again. "I'm not planning anything. I merely want to observe him. I'm sure he wouldn't try to do anything to Lord Cedric here in public."

"Don't be overly attached to him as the perpetrator," Lord Simeon replied. "Just because the handwriting is similar doesn't mean we can firmly conclude that he himself wrote those threatening notes."

"But it really was exactly the same..."

"There are people out there who are especially skilled at imitating other people's handwriting. Certainly, there are various aspects of Patrice's behavior that cast him in a suspicious light, but we have to keep those things in mind for what they are, rather than using them to draw any hasty conclusions."

"I—well..."

"And I'm sure I needn't remind you, but you mustn't let your guard down around Cedric either. I can't say anything too specific where others might overhear us, but I can say that he's someone around whom you should exercise plenty of caution."

He said this with such a serious expression that it startled me. My gut instinct was to say: *Lord Cedric? Why would you say such nonsense?* But I couldn't, because—as I had to remind myself—I, too, had a sense that he was hiding something.

On the surface he came across as the perfect heir, but I had an unmistakable sense that below the surface, there was some sort of a catch. I wondered if Lord Simeon already knew the truth about Lord Cedric that lay at the heart of my feelings of unease. What was making him express so firmly that I should exercise caution?

I asked him, "What exactly do you mean?"

"I'll explain later. For now, I ask you just to stay alert. And not to accompany any men who invite you to spend time with them. Don't accept any drinks you're offered, either. There are those who would try to harm you by mixing in excessive quantities of alcohol."

His words had begun as something more earnest, but had quickly become a standard lecture. My shoulders sagged. *Oh well. Whatever secret Lord Cedric might be harboring, I doubt anything will happen at the party.* After listening to all of Lord Simeon's lecture, I left him and went my own way.

Why does the Vice Captain have to be so overprotective? It's been years since my debut, and I've spent all of those years as a wallflower. What are the chances of men deciding to talk to me now, after all this time?

But the moment I had that thought, a group of men appeared before me. "Excuse me, young lady. Might I ask your name?" I was flabbergasted, and for a moment I stood still, unsure of how to reply. *Wha...? Is he talking to me?* If I wasn't mistaken, he was the third son of House Larrieux.

"Would you be so kind as to accompany me for one dance?" This gentleman was the heir to House Taillon.

"I'm so glad I could be here to see such a lovely flower in bloom. Please, let us find a quiet corner where we can talk." The third one, who presented a drink to me as he spoke, was not even an heir, but the *head* of House Villeneuve! *Where's his wife!?*

A procession of men gave me their attention. I couldn't refuse them fast enough—there was always one more. I thought, *What on earth is going on?* I was suddenly aware that Lord Simeon's little lecture wasn't born of overprotectiveness at all. The transformative arts of the ladies of Tarentule were so formidable that I not only looked like a different person, but was

treated as one, too.

I've met these people plenty of times, but until now they'd never actually noticed my existence. I'm standing out from the crowd, and it's BIZARRE! And when people come up to me, that just means even more people notice me! Please, everyone, stop noticing me! I don't want people to pay attention to me —I'M supposed to pay attention to THEM! I like to be on the outside looking in! I don't even want to be a wallflower, I want to be WALLPAPER!

"Now *you* are a young lady I've never seen before, and a sight for sore eyes at that. Could I have this dance?"

"No, I don't dance!" I hastily replied. "I'm just wallpaper!"

"What?"

Oops. After being spoken to one too many times, I'd accidentally replied honestly to one of these men. *But it's true, wallpaper can't dance. It would definitely be a struggle.*

"Sorry, forget what I just said. Think of me as...a harmless wandering ghost."

"You realize you're only intriguing me more!"

"What if I'm just a shadow cast on the wall?"

"Oh, if a shadow could talk, that would be rather terrifying!" said the man. "Hold on, for you to be saying preposterous things like that, you can only be...Miss Marielle!? I can't believe it!"

"Oh?" Hearing my name brought me back to my senses. When I looked up properly, one of the city's preeminent sources of male beauty stood before me. "Y-your Highness! I wasn't aware that you'd be in attendance!"

Beneath his black hair, his masculine yet beautiful features stared at me in disbelief. I genuinely had no idea that Prince Severin's name was on the guest list. *It takes someone of Earl Pautrier's status to personally invite the crown prince to his grandson's debut, I suppose!*

All aflutter, I gave him something resembling a curtsy. "I must apologize for my rudeness. I've been rather distracted so far this evening."

"Well, I must say, nobody is ever distracted in quite the same way as you,"

said His Highness with a sigh. “I made rather an embarrassing mistake as well, asking you to dance before I realized you were my closest friend’s fiancée.”

Ooh, sorry about that, I thought. So even you were fooled by my appearance, Your Highness!

He stared at me, unblinking, and with an expression that was quite difficult to read. “You seem to have put a remarkable amount of effort into your appearance this evening. Well, that in itself is hardly out of the ordinary for any young lady. What surprises me is quite how different you look as a result.”

“Well, you see, one thing led to another...” I began.

But, almost to himself, he said, “That was rather a close shave...”

“What was?”

But rather than tell me what exactly was a close shave, His Highness dismissed my question with a brusque wave of the hand. “It doesn’t matter. Either way, it’s clear that you’re the same person on the inside. Anyway, tell me, why are you so distracted tonight?”

A member of the Royal Order of Knights stood guard behind him. I recognized his face—he was called Alain. *Good evening, Alain!* His uniform was not the ceremonial variety, but the everyday type, just as Lord Simeon would wear while escorting His Highness.

“Because I can hardly walk three steps without someone—including you, Your Highness—inviting me to talk or dance or share a drink. I’m so unused to being the center of attention, I don’t know what to do!”

“As far as I’ve seen, this is the norm for young ladies when they come to a party like this. It’s only you, in your usual guise, that experiences these events differently.”

“Yes, exactly. And when I told you I was wallpaper, it was a true expression of what I *wished* to be the case. Although I soon realized that wallpaper can’t move, so the ghost option might be better.”

“I don’t know which is better,” he replied, “but I’m afraid I’ve no time to spend on anything quite as demented as keeping up with your thought

processes. Where is Simeon, anyway? I can't imagine why he's letting *all this* run amok." I had the sense that he was disparaging me, but his words recalled something quite different for me.

"Oh! You're right! By all means, go and find Lord Simeon! I believe he's somewhere over there!" I pointed His Highness in the direction I believed Lord Simeon was in. Truth be told, I had very little idea where Lord Simeon was at that moment, but I was certain His Highness would be able to find him. *Or, more likely, Lord Simeon will find HIM. No matter how far apart they are, he'll always find His Highness!*

"What do you mean? There's no need for us to reconvene yet. I've only just greeted Earl Pautrier and his grandson."

"Don't say that! It may only be a fleeting dream, but please, make it come true!"

"Wh-What the devil are you talking about?"

"I'll disappear, so please, don't worry about me!"

"Now hold on there!" he exclaimed. "I'd feel *less* comfortable if you disappeared! Why do you feel compelled to do that!?"

Disrespectful to his status though it was, I ignored His Highness's words and ran off. Once I was lost in the crowd, I knew he wouldn't be able to come after me, as he himself would inevitably be beset by people approaching him from all sides.

I found a curtain and ran behind it, concealing myself in the shadows. At last I had a chance to get away from everyone's attentive eyes. I breathed a sigh of relief. Hiding gave me a deep sense of reassurance. I felt I could just about go on living.

Once I'd calmed down, I reflected on what had just happened. *I wonder if His Highness went to find Lord Simeon after all. I hope he did. Lord Simeon is always so concerned about my wellbeing, I have to do what I can to help him achieve some measure of happiness as well. That's what I've decided.*

I took a small peek from behind the curtain and saw nothing but a blurry mass of people moving in all directions. It might have been that I couldn't see clearly,

but I was far more conscious of the sounds of music and voices than usual. At times I heard gossiping about Lord Cedric. Some voices even touched on His Highness, Lord Simeon, and myself. It didn't seem as if I'd be able to move from that spot just yet.

Despite my ambitions of investigating Lord Patrice without being noticed, I still didn't have the slightest idea where he was. Not having my glasses was really quite frustrating. *If a genie appeared right now and granted me three wishes, one of them would definitely be to improve my eyesight. I guess the second would be for my family to be happy and prosperous, and the third would be for Lord Simeon to be holding a riding crop.*

Staying hidden, I strained my eyes to look at the flocks of people. *Oh! Is that Lady Aurelia over there, the radiant-looking blonde one? I'm quite proud of myself for spotting her even without my glasses! I suppose she is one of the jewels of high society. Not only her beauty, but her entire presence makes her stand out. Lady Aurelia certainly is wonderful! I wish I could get just a tiny bit closer...*

Out of nowhere, a voice blasted in my ears at a distance rather too close for comfort. "She really is shameless and disgusting! How dare she!?"

I all but jumped out of my skin. A pair of young ladies had positioned themselves nearby without me noticing. *Wait, aren't they the Le Comte sisters? So this is where they've been.*

Evelyn continued, "Calling in outside help is going too far! It's excessively sly and sneaky!"

"That's not the dress she was supposed to be wearing!" cried Suzette. "I can't believe she'd arrange a special delivery on the day of the party! Deceitful, wicked woman!"

There was no need to guess that I was the target of the sisters' indignant words.

"And she's only had to put on so many layers of makeup because underneath, she's a plain-faced cow!"

"And all the gullible men propositioning her are merely exposing their

foolishness. It's all fake, a forgery of beauty. Take off all the layers of polish and she's nothing but ugly. How can they all fail to realize that!?"

Yes, indeed, I thought to myself, it's just as you say. It's all true, I fully admit it.

However, I also felt I could consider this a victory for the Three Flowers and their handiwork. I suspected that if I told them just how bitter and resentful it had made the sisters, they'd be very smug indeed.

The Le Comte sisters let out a stream of complaints aimed not only at me, but at the young men at the party as well. It seemed that every conversation they engaged in with a gentleman had ended rather quickly when their relatively low-grade birth had become apparent. They'd probably been trying to secure men of too high a rank. *With no noble rank at all, they'd be better off aiming lower, just as I'd have done if not for Lord Simeon. Anyone of too high a rank is unlikely to see them as viable marriage partners, but amongst the lower-ranked nobles, I'm sure they can find suitors who don't turn up their noses at young ladies with no noble rank at all.* They were both very good-looking, and their family had a decent amount of money, so as long as they maintained reasonable expectations, it seemed like they should be able to find husbands.

I wanted to give them advice, but I couldn't exactly leave my hiding place. Besides, they didn't know I'd overheard their conversation. I felt it better to silently cheer them on from the shadows. *You can do this! There are tons of eligible bachelors at this party, so if you persevere and really look, I'm sure you'll both meet someone great!*

Of course, I didn't need to say anything, because they had no intention of giving up. They spied another fine young man and proceeded in his direction. As I watched them go, I silently expressed my admiration for their efforts.

Everyone's trying their hardest—the men who were approaching me and the young ladies like the Le Comte sisters who are trying to find husbands. For young people, gatherings like this are a vital opportunity to meet potential partners. Beautiful romances are born here, and so are terrible tragedies. My purpose in life is to stand on the sidelines and watch it all, but it is rather vexing that I had to hide in the curtains to be able to do that today... After all the effort the Three Flowers put into dressing me up, I'd rather be back to normal. Even

Lord Simeon didn't respond to it particularly well...

Perhaps, I decided, anyone who knew the normal me couldn't help but see all of this as artificial. Contrary to being impressed, they might even be thinking that it was shameless of me to go so far.

I felt somehow dejected. I didn't care what other people thought, but I'd wanted Lord Simeon to praise my appearance at the very least. I needed to accept that I was in no position to be expecting such things from him.

I let out a quiet sigh...and in that instant, I lost my hiding place as the curtains opened.

I jumped in fright at being exposed, but the voice that greeted me was a kind one. "What are you doing in a place like that?" It was Lord Cedric. He peered at me, baffled, as I shied away from the light.

"O-oh, Lord Cedric," I stammered. "I didn't realize you were there. I might ask you the same thing, though. The party's in your honor, so what are you doing in a far corner like this?"

"I found myself at risk of drowning in the sea of people, so I made my escape. I suspect we both had the same idea." He chuckled. "More precisely, I had to catch my breath, so I asked my grandmother's permission. I understand why tonight is so important, but as I feared, being in front of so many people puts rather a strain on me."

I attempted a polite laugh. "Yes, I was also trying to get away from the crowds so I could take a breather."

Unfortunately, I longed to tell him, the only way I can calm down is by hiding myself completely. Normally I can make myself into part of the scenery just by standing still, but tonight I'm in a rather different situation.

Lord Cedric offered me his hand. "Let's excuse ourselves to the lounge. We can rest for a moment, away from all the attention." He gestured in the direction of the doorway leading to the small relaxation room.

I hesitated, recalling Lord Simeon's advice. *What should I do? Going with him might turn out to be a mistake. And yet, I don't sense any danger from him...*

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

“Oh, no, I’m quite all right. Yes, it would be fine just for a moment.” I took his hand, ultimately deciding I wouldn’t refuse his offer. *I wonder if Lord Simeon will get angry with me later. He’s not too far away, though. A short while would be fine, surely?*

We left the banquet hall and entered the lounge. A serving girl arrived and poured tea for us, and when she came close I realized that I didn’t recognize her face. *I investigated every corner of the manor. Was she not there?* But it wasn’t uncommon for temporary staff to be called in for a large event like this, so perhaps, I thought, it wasn’t that odd.

Once she’d left, Lord Cedric said rather awkwardly, “You must have expected I’d handle myself better, but in the face of all this pomp and circumstance, I find myself rather daunted.”

“Actually,” I replied, “I’m quite the same. And after all the effort my friends put in to make me look beautiful, it turns out I’m entirely uncomfortable with it. I can’t be at ease at all.”

“Oh, really? Personally I think it becomes you very well indeed. I meant it when I said you looked like a fairy. It’s only natural that you’d attract a lot of attention.”

“I’m still surprised that it made this much of a difference, though.”

“When a lady changes her clothes, she can turn into a different person— isn’t that what they say? Today you’ve had the opportunity to show off charms that no one ever knew were lying dormant in you.” He offered these words to me in a tone that sounded natural, not like empty flattery. I was glad, but honestly, I was ill at ease as well. Perhaps noticing this, he let out another chuckle and said, “In any case, your biggest charms lie elsewhere. Personally I prefer your usual, undecorated self.”

“Well, thank you.” *I suppose he knows me as someone plain, so if I appear before him like this, it’s too late to make a new impression.*

“And I must say, it’s very like you to be so entirely indifferent to your own charms, Marielle. It’s quite interesting!”

“I suppose you’re right. I’d definitely say it’s more accurate to consider myself interesting rather than charming.”

“...I fear you’ve taken that in a negative sense that I didn’t intend. I meant that you’re exceedingly interesting, and that is something that lends you plenty of charm.”

“Yes,” I replied, “I understand what you mean, and I’m grateful.” I hadn’t taken Lord Cedric’s words in a negative way, and I cheerfully smiled and nodded back at him...so why did he still look so perturbed? *Did I do something wrong?* I cocked my head in confusion.

In response, he smiled bitterly. “What a bother. You really have no conception of how other people see you. I did my best to express it in no uncertain terms, but it still didn’t do the trick.”

“Excuse me?”

He leaned forward and took my hands, which were resting in my lap. “Perhaps, given the nature of your fiancé, you see no need to look anywhere else, but...if possible, could I please ask you to look around as well, if only a little bit?”

“What do you...?”

His deep blue eyes stared intently at me from a very close distance. *Is...is this the exact situation Lord Simeon meant I should be on my guard against?* If someone saw me in this situation, they would definitely get the wrong impression. I tried to subtly draw my hands away, but Lord Cedric would not let them go.

“Have you noticed that there’s a man right here who’s thoroughly charmed by you?”

“Excuse me, Lord Cedric?”

His gaze was filled with an entirely different intensity than usual. It was the first time anyone had ever fixed their eyes on me in that manner, and I had no idea how to take it. All I knew was that this was very bad, and I was extremely uncomfortable with the situation.

“I’m not saying this to flatter you,” he continued. “I mean it in all sincerity. I’ve been thoroughly drawn to you from the moment we first met.”

“Wh...what!?” What is he saying? What even is this? Did he just admit he has feelings for me? There’s no way, surely. Why would he be... I mean, we’ve only just met, and we’ve hardly had time to develop much of a relationship. Love at first sight is only meant to happen if the protagonist is an UNPARALLELED beauty!

I was entirely lost for words, and seeing this, a soft laugh slipped out of him and he finally released my hands. At once, the mood was entirely different from before. *Was he always like this?* I wondered. *I thought he was a kind person, wearing his heart on his sleeve. He seemed like someone who was easy to get along with because he put on no airs, no pretense. Now, though, I can’t perceive what he’s thinking at all.* All of a sudden, I felt keenly aware of how little I knew about his true nature.

Perhaps he’s mocking me? In his eyes, I saw a sense of trickery, of the darkness that can lurk within people. “I’m honored by your words,” I replied at last, putting on a smile. I decided it might be best to respond as if playing it off as a joke—or to leave things ambiguous, at least. “This is the first time I’ve been complimented by a gentleman like that in my entire life.”

“Oh my. Lord Simeon never compliments you like that?”

I froze. “I...” It hadn’t occurred to me until he said it, but indeed, I couldn’t think of any particular moment when Lord Simeon had paid me a compliment. He was often growing exasperated with me and rebuking me, but complimenting me? Not that I could recall.

Oh, now that I think, he did tell me he liked my novels. That wasn’t related to my own personal charms, though. At our first meeting he also said something about my appearance being “quite lovely,” but that was nothing but empty flattery. He was just saying the right thing in front of my father.

I sighed internally, lost in thought, and it prompted another laugh from Lord Cedric. “What a cruel fiancé. A lovely woman like this, and he never pays her a single compliment.”

“No, it’s not like that,” I began to protest...but the more I thought back on our

interactions, the less I felt able to deny it. Ever since I found out that he knew about the way I spent my time—for both pleasure and profit—I'd made no effort whatsoever to cover it up. Who could ever compliment a woman who was continually shouting from the rooftops about her fangirl urges?

Lord Cedric shrugged. "He seems to be quite generous with his affections when talking to Evelyne and Suzette. In fact, his behavior with them is quite the opposite to what you've described. One starts to doubt his faithfulness."

His words startled me. He knew about that? However, I was already fairly certain that it hadn't been anything resembling infidelity.

"I will mention, Miss Marielle, that it's not yet too late. You're not married, so you could still start afresh."

"Lord Cedric?"

He produced a small box from his breast pocket and opened it in front of me. Inside was a ring set with a single large emerald, which refracted the light into a million bewitching splinters.

I'd seen this spectacular ring somewhere before. *Wasn't Lady Monique wearing this a few days ago?* "That ring, it's..."

"My grandmother gave it to me last night. She said it's been inherited by the wives of House Pautrier for generations, and that one day I was to give it to my own bride."

Generations of wives... That explained why Lady Monique had it, being the widow of the eldest son. But Lord Cedric didn't have a wife yet, so it seemed awfully soon to be handing it over to him.

"If I say that I'd like to give this to you, will you please accept it?" he asked searchingly.

I looked up at him again. From his facial expression, I honestly couldn't tell whether he was being serious or toying with me.

I tried to give another answer that could fit in either scenario: serious proposal or overzealous joke. "Lord Simeon gives me flowers. Those are more to my taste." I sensed that it would be dangerous to be too drawn in by the

atmosphere he was trying to create. Right now, it was as if the genteel kindness he'd always conveyed before was an illusion. Instead, he looked like a shrewd and cunning individual. *Perhaps this is what a REAL black-hearted scoundrel is like*, I considered. And yet, for reasons unknown, I had a hard time finding anything wonderful about it. My fangirl urges were not fired up at all. All it did was make me intensely wary.

I put all my effort into hiding this. I couldn't let it show on my face. "After all," I continued, "I am a fairy in a flower garden. I have no need for any human ornaments."

Laughing, Lord Cedric closed the box and returned it to his pocket. He didn't show any signs of pursuing me persistently, but it felt like only a temporary reprieve nonetheless. I still could not tell what he was thinking at all.

Lord Cedric glanced away briefly, so my eyes followed, and I saw that the serving girl from before was watching us from the doorway. Rather than entering, she gave a slight bow and left immediately.

"I suppose we mustn't stay here too long. If we're alone in a room like this, your venerable fiancé will get angry again," said Lord Cedric with a touch of sarcasm. He stood from his chair, and I did as well, seeing the wisdom in his words. We still had tea left in our cups, but if anyone realized that the two of us had left the party to spend time alone, it would definitely have come across as an illicit rendezvous. I assumed the servant had come by out of concern for our reputations.

When we exited into the corridor, it was rather chilly. It was midwinter, after all, so it would be a poor choice to stray too far from the warmth of a fire in my off-the-shoulder party dress. I quickened my pace a little, hoping to get back to the banquet hall as quickly as possible, when Lord Cedric stopped and said, "Oho!"

I looked where he was looking and saw a figure walking in the opposite direction, away from the banquet hall. I could tell that it was a man, but without my glasses on, I couldn't see exactly who it was at this distance.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"It's Lord Patrice. I wonder where he's off to."

Lord Patrice? I instantly regained the purpose that I'd lost while listening to Lord Cedric's befuddling words shortly beforehand. *Lord Patrice! I was looking for him! That's the entire reason I parted ways with Lord Simeon! So this is where he's been.*

Indeed—where was he going? “To use the facilities?” I suggested.

“No, it appeared very much like he was on his way to the second floor.”

The two of us followed Lord Patrice, careful to keep hidden. When he reached the staircase, he turned his head this way and that, as if afraid of what prying eyes might think. Then he began to climb. Lord Cedric and I looked at each other. There was no way around it: what we were witnessing was suspicious behavior. Lord Patrice wasn't staying as an overnight guest, so there was no obvious reason for him to visit the second floor. His slippery manner also invited plenty of suspicion about where he was going and why.

What popped into my head were the words scrawled on the wall in Lord Cedric's room. *He's probably on his way to undertake something else along those lines.* I clenched my fist, certain that I was right. “Let's follow him,” I said to Lord Cedric. “In terms of who wrote those threatening notes, he's the primary suspect. We can probably catch him at the scene of the crime!”

Lord Cedric instantly gave a nod of assent. Once Lord Patrice had climbed the staircase and was just out of view, we followed him up there, masking our footsteps as much as possible.

We peered along the second-floor corridor just in time to see him walk past Lord Cedric's room. *That's odd. So that wasn't his destination after all?* We followed him with our eyes to see where he was going, and he stopped in front of a door further along. *The collection room, if I recall correctly.*

The two of us looked at one another again. Perhaps we were about to catch him in a *different* criminal act?

He stood in front of the locked door, rummaging and rattling around. *Ugh, how frustrating that I can't see properly. But the motion suggests he must be unlocking the door?* As if to verify my suspicion, Lord Patrice opened the door and walked through it. Dismayed, I walked along the corridor toward the collection room.

I wondered when he could possibly have obtained the key. It seemed inconceivable that he could have stolen it from the butler, who kept them on his person at all times. It also seemed inconceivable that the butler could be his co-conspirator. Now that I thought, the servants in the kitchen had gossiped about him standing in front of the door to the collection room and rattling the doorknob. Could he have been taking a mold of the lock, perhaps?

I thought back to my conversation with Mr. Danton, too, and it made Lord Patrice's goal crystal clear. The earl, all his relatives and all of the guests were busy at the party. So were the servants—none of them would have time to visit the second floor at present. He could sneak in and steal a treasure or two while all eyes were averted, then sell his ill-gotten prizes to pay off his debt. In all likelihood, I considered, this was another reason he'd been visiting the estate every day. He needed to be sure he knew his way around.

No matter what financial difficulties he's experiencing, the respectable son of a baron couldn't ever... Well, no, I suppose this family has quite a few problem children.

Despite my fraught mood, I was careful not to make a sound as I stepped closer and peeked around the door frame into the open room. In the pitch-black room, Lord Patrice moved by the light of a single candle. He tried to prize open some of the cases and cabinets where the jewels were stored, but they were each individually locked. Evidently, he hadn't been able to duplicate the keys that would unlock these. He cursed under his breath.

Lord Cedric tapped me on the shoulder. He pulled me away from the door for a moment and whispered, "I'll keep watch here. You run and fetch help."

I nodded, and turned around to go. Even if I'd tried to get involved, there were priceless valuables everywhere, and the second the glass in the cases or cabinets was smashed, it would all be over. I decided at this point I could dare to make a tiny amount of noise as I crept away. I felt confident I could muster sufficient help before he had time to achieve his goal and escape.

Leaving the scene in Lord Cedric's hands, I picked up the pace and returned to the first floor. I found a servant near the banquet hall and had him summon the butler. Then I explained the situation as quickly as I could. The butler gathered

up a group of men right away and went up to the second floor. *I've done what I can, and the rest is up to you. I'll be cheering you all on, right up until the end!*

With no need to conceal their footsteps at all any longer, they thundered up the staircase, but before they reached the top, a scream and a thunderous crash resounded from upstairs.

“What was that!?” exclaimed several of the men present. The servants and I all froze in shock for a moment. It didn't sound like something small—one of the smaller cases being smashed open, or something of that scale. It was more like something very large and heavy had been smashed to bits. The floor still reverberated from the impact. Had one of the immense cabinets been knocked over, perhaps?

But that scream... I imagine it was Lord Patrice rather than Lord Cedric, but what happened to make him scream like that?

Everyone ran into the collection room. I stayed by the door and gingerly peered inside. As I thought, a cabinet had fallen. Lord Patrice was on the ground, having fallen on his backside, while jewelry and shattered glass blanketed the floor around him.

Lord Cedric was nowhere to be seen.

“Lord Patrice?” said the butler.

With a start, Lord Patrice turned his head and looked at the assembled servants, who held out lamps and lit up the room. In the glow, I noticed that Lord Patrice's cravat was soiled. *How did that happen? And it's not just his cravat, but his shirt that's stained as well. It's red, as if he spilled wine on it or something.* I hoped that was the case, anyway, because the alternative that momentarily occurred to me was too terrible for words. Directly beside him on the floor was a ceremonial sword that had tumbled out of its display case. The blade was out of its scabbard, and it, too, was covered in some sort of red substance.

And, looking at the area around the fallen cabinet, not only glass and jewels had been spilled. The carpet was stained with something dark and wet. *Is that... No, it couldn't be...?*

“Where’s Lord Cedric?” I said, not even fully conscious of the words slipping out of my mouth.

In response, Lord Patrice began to tremble. “It’s not what it looks like!” he protested, springing up from the ground and drawing away from the crowd. Despite having nowhere to run to, he raced deeper into the room, screaming in his own defense all the while. “You’re wrong! It wasn’t me! The cabinet fell down on its own—you have to believe me! I didn’t do anything!”

A servant ran after him. Even after he was cornered, Lord Patrice continued to yell that we were wrong, that we’d misunderstood.

I wished Lord Simeon was with me. *I have to tell him.* I turned back toward the door, silently cursing my quivering feet. That instant, I saw a figure sliding smoothly out of the door while all the servants were distracted by the commotion.

The man’s clothing marked him out as a servant, but based on his stature, I couldn’t help thinking he resembled Lord Cedric. It was a little alarming. I wondered why a servant would be leaving the room alone while everyone else was so focused on Lord Patrice. Where was he going? To alert the police, perhaps? But if so, surely the butler would have given such an order out loud?

I turned and looked at the inside of the room once more. Sweeping my eyes across the room with a level head, I realized there was no sign of another person passed out on the floor, and nor was anyone pinned underneath the cabinet. I considered the possibility of him being in a dark corner that I couldn’t see from where I stood, but then someone else should surely have noticed him. *It’s quite puzzling. Where did Lord Cedric go?* In all the commotion, one of the most crucial details had been completely overlooked.

Rather than immediately running out into the corridor, I poked just my head through the doorway to try and see if the man who’d slipped out was still nearby. The dimly lit corridor held no signs of life except for the motion of a single door, closing without making a sound.

I crept along as far as that door, then hesitated a moment. *Should I knock? No, I can’t give my target any warning. A surprise attack is the only way.*

I put my hand on the doorknob, then steeled my courage and twisted it open.

Inside, I found just darkness and silence. The moonlight through the window provided the only dim light. There was neither sight nor sound of any life. *Do I have the wrong door? No, I'm quite sure I saw him go into this one. I never took my eyes off him for a second. I'm sure this was the one.*

I crept into the room. The sparse furniture gave the impression of a room that was not currently in use. The window was closed, and when I drew nearer, I could confirm that it was locked from the inside. *If he'd left the manor from here, the window would have to be unlocked. But then, where on earth did he disappear to? A chill ran through me. Could he be lurking here in the darkness, watching my every move?*

Just as I decided that it was time to find Lord Simeon after all, a voice spoke directly in my ear. "You are a very inconvenient person indeed. You were supposed to tell them what you saw and then run straight back to your fiancé."

I jumped in fright. How did he get this close when I'd sensed no one nearby at all? Just as I opened my mouth to scream, a large hand covered it. He pulled his other arm around me, keeping me firmly in place. Unable to move or speak, I struggled for dear life.

"Calm down. I have no intention of causing you any harm."

Even with my head in disarray, I recognized that voice. I stopped moving and turned my attention to the body that was keeping mine fixed in place. *His height, his physique, the toughness of his hands...* I knew those hands. We'd practiced dancing together, my body close to his.

We'd been together until just a few minutes earlier.

"Don't make a fuss, all right?" said the man, an amiable tone to his voice. "I'd rather not use force to keep you quiet." Then, slowly, he removed his hand from my mouth and lessened the force with which his other hand gripped my body. With the little freedom to move that I now had, I turned to face him. My eyes had grown used to the darkness by now, so I took in the appearance of the man standing right behind me.

It wasn't the face I expected. In fact, it was a man I had never seen before in my life.

And yet, the secretive laughter, that peculiar chuckle, was most definitely Lord Cedric's voice.

"Lord Cedric? Is that you?"

"I'm finished with that name," the man replied. "It will do for now, though. At some point I'll have you call me something else."

What does he mean? I wondered. Is he NOT Lord Cedric? But he is still the person I know, isn't he? Which means... What DOES it mean?

"I knew you were no ordinary young lady," he continued, "but I didn't know you were quite so fearless. I felt certain you'd go straight to your fiancé's side. What to do, what to do...? If I leave you here and go, the scheme I've worked so hard to set up will all go to waste."

He closed the door, which I'd left open when I entered. That was when I noticed for the first time that a third person was in the room. The light from the corridor disappeared before I got a proper look, so all I could tell was that it seemed like a rather large individual.

My mind raced in confusion as I tried to make sense of what was happening. Lord Patrice had attempted a theft and it had led to a big commotion...but amidst all that, Lord Cedric had been planning something as well, if I understood. But what was it? To sneak out without anyone knowing? But if that was all, why would he behave in such a manner? And who was the other person? If Lord Cedric was working with someone else, then it had to be a rather elaborate scheme, didn't it?

He just mentioned a scheme, but...does that mean that the commotion around Lord Patrice was something he caused intentionally as well? I just don't understand what's going on here.

"Now that everything's in place, I think I'll just take you with me. After all, where you are, your fiancé is sure to follow. Besides, the servants are fully preoccupied, which means I've more than achieved my goal. It's not quite what I'd intended, but perhaps it is best if you join me." He spoke in a soft voice, entirely unbecoming of the grave situation. It sounded as if he was inviting me over for tea, maybe.

I understood, however, that he meant nothing of the sort. “Wh-Where are you taking me?”

He laughed, and replied in a jolly, singsong voice, “Where indeed? Wherever I please, I’d say.” Then, with me still in his grasp, he moved further into the room—toward the window.

“Please, wait a moment,” I said. “What’s going on? I have to know. What kind of distraction did you create, exactly? Is someone injured? What did you do?”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry. All that ‘blood’ was just a little touch of theatrical magic. The best way to capture people’s attention is to give them something to focus on, wouldn’t you say? A shocking spectacle. A murder case is far more exciting than a burglary, and makes a far bigger commotion. That creates the perfect distraction for us to casually make our escape.”

He frog-marched me in the direction of the window, gripping me tightly again, so much so that my feet were half in the air and I couldn’t even keep myself planted on the floor. As we moved, it finally dawned on me that I was about to be kidnapped.

“N-no! Stop! I’m not going anywhere! Let go of me!”

“Stop struggling, Marielle. I told you, I don’t want to use force on you. I could knock you out for the time being, but I’d prefer not to cause you any discomfort.”

“Then let me GO!” I put all my energy into my diaphragm and began to shout at the top of my lungs, “Please, someone—”

But without a moment’s hesitation, he covered my mouth again. My muffled voice strained against his hand.

“Well,” he said, “I can’t leave here while both my hands are occupied. I suppose I’ll have to teach you some patience after all.”

What does that mean!? Is he going to hit me? And then...take me somewhere while I’m unconscious? This is serious!

As exciting a development as this would be in a story, I definitely did not want to experience it in real life. Unlike in a story, I had no gallant love interest to

arrive just in time to save me. Even Lord Simeon would probably give up quite quickly if I was taken somewhere out of reach. After all, the duty of the Royal Order of Knights was only to guard the royal family. Investigating a kidnapping would be far outside of their jurisdiction.

No! I don't want to go! On the inside, I was screaming as loudly as I could, even if it was in vain.

And just at that moment, the door burst open with a clatter. I was blinded by the dazzling light that streamed into the room. The man holding me seemed to have the same reaction, and he immediately froze.

Then a clear voice resounded.

"This is as far as you go. Unhand Marielle and surrender quietly. You can resist all you want, but I won't let you escape."

Lord Simeon!

I knew it was him before my vision had even returned to normal. Tears of relief welled up in my eyes. I blinked to try and clear my eyes, and once I did, I saw the welcome sight of Lord Simeon before me. A group of men in police uniforms entered behind him.

Just above my head, a whistle resounded from my captor. "Now this is quite the surprise. You're far more prepared than I expected."

"Naturally. These men have been standing by since before the party began."

At Lord Simeon's belt was a saber that he hadn't been wearing before. *Did someone lend it to him? And the police have been at the ready? Why? Did he know in advance that all this commotion would happen?*

"Gosh," the man replied. "In that case, do you mind if I ask what it is exactly that you've figured out?"

Lord Simeon began without hesitation. "You masqueraded as Cedric and wormed your way into House Pautrier so that you could take advantage of them. Your goal was to steal one of their priceless treasures. However, since merely stealing it and leaving would be too dull for you, you constructed this entire performance, and drew in Marielle and myself as your supporting cast

members. You pretended that someone was sending you threats, then made it appear that Patrice was the culprit. Realizing that he was after the treasure as well, you decided to use his attempted theft as a distraction, calling the guards so that they'd be preoccupied with him. To make the scene even more dramatic, you made it appear very much as if Patrice had hurt or killed someone. You planned to make your escape while everyone was up in arms, then surprise the world in the coming days with a grand reveal."

As he announced all these details in a thoroughly detached fashion, I was left stunned. *It can't be... It was nothing but a deception, right from the start?* I'd had a few doubts, to be sure, but I'd never expected to learn that not a single word he'd said to me was true. He played the role of the grandson so perfectly that I'd never doubted him in that aspect, not even for a second.

And yet, when I looked back, there were several ways in which he didn't quite fit the required image after all. He had a very noble bearing for someone who was raised a commoner, for example, and his highly trained physique had also seemed rather at odds with what I knew of him.

Individually, each detail had felt only slightly out of place. If not for Lord Simeon warning me to be on my guard, I'd never have thought much about it. Why wouldn't he have tried to take on more of a nobleman's demeanor, rather than letting himself seem too much of a commoner in the earl's manor? After all, if one spends a lot of time in a new place, it's easy to get swept up in the atmosphere and find your behavior changing to match. No doubt, this person had played the role with that possibility in mind.

He whistled again. "Most impressive. I can do nothing but express my admiration toward the clever Vice Captain for figuring it out. But I'd like to ask, when did you first catch on?" The voice above my head showed no sign of being flustered at having all his plans revealed. On the contrary, he sounded like he was enjoying himself.

With no apparent interest in this impish and jovial attitude, Lord Simeon answered in a detached manner. "I knew from the start."

"From the start?"

"You painted yourself as a weakling, deathly afraid of these threats and with

no combat ability of your own that you could use to defend yourself, but when I shook your hand, I knew it was the hand of someone used to holding a sword. If you wanted to deceive me, you should have worn thick gloves.”

This was met with silence. Lord Simeon continued, “The entire premise was rather suspicious. A relative raised abroad, whom no one in House Pautrier, nor anyone related to them, had ever met? I had my doubts straight away. It’s easy for you to impersonate other people, of course. I gather that you’re renowned for your ability to transform yourself, so it was no surprise that you made your appearance so accurate. The representatives that were sent to Linden had only met the real Cedric a handful of times, so they didn’t know him especially well. It was easy to convince them that the person they knew to have initially refused had suddenly changed his mind. They believed this without question, and gladly brought you back with them, not realizing you were a fake.”

The real Lord Cedric refused? So he had no intention of coming here? I suppose that’s what let this man carry out his scheme so confidently. He had no fear that the man himself would suddenly appear and expose his deception.

“After we met that day,” Lord Simeon continued, “I immediately had an investigative team sent to Linden. But of course, it’s quite a distance to travel, so we only barely received the results in time. It was very fortunate indeed that they arrived when they did. It’s because of this that your plans have gone up in smoke. The manor is surrounded by knights and police units. You have no hope of escape.”

The policemen, who had come prepared with such things as sabers and ropes, gradually sidled closer. Since the man had me as a hostage, they were careful not to make any sudden movements. At least the hands he gripped me with couldn’t simultaneously hold any weapons—but wasn’t I forgetting something?

I swept my eyes across the room, looking for the other man I’d glimpsed before. With the room now lit by the lamps that had been carried in, I knew he’d be far easier to see by now.

“Very impressive, Vice Captain. If you’ve guessed everything else so accurately, then I’ve no doubt you know what my name is? Now is the time. Call me by my name.”

I realized at this point that his goading words were not only an attempt to put on a brave face. They were to draw everyone's attention to him. *I have to tell Lord Simeon somehow.* I struggled as hard as I could, but the hands did not give me the slightest leeway. *I can't speak, but please, you have to notice him too!*

"All I feel the need to call you is a common criminal," Lord Simeon replied. "Besides, don't fairies tend to get rather sour when you use their names without permission?"

"How mean!" said an unfamiliar voice. "Lutin is a fairy that *loves* other mischief makers. I'm sure he'd be grateful!"

I let out the loudest muffled yell that I could, but in that exact moment, a man leaped out of a shadowed corner. His enormous frame swooped down on the policemen so quickly that two were knocked down before they could even react. The others attempted to draw their swords, but were struck before they could. With fists like boulders and arms like tree trunks, he showed the assembled police force no quarter at all.

I watched as he took them down in a flash. *A man with a body that appears to be hewn of rock, but with a sharply contrasting face that resembles a beautiful statue...* I'd seen an extraordinary person like this once before. *So the strongman from the circus was Lutin's ally all along!?*

Next his immense frame bore down on Lord Simeon. My breath caught in my throat. But rather than being knocked out cold, Lord Simeon nimbly dodged his fist.

The strongman came after him with speed that felt uncharacteristic of his size. He attempted to land another blow, and a third, but Lord Simeon avoided them all—then found an opening and struck back. The slash of his saber was blocked by the man's speedily drawn cutlass.

I didn't move a muscle as I witnessed the battle before me. Sword clashed upon sword as they went for each other. Sometimes the sounds of their collision reverberated so loudly, my ears rang. *If one of the swords strikes true, it will cut their body, and spill their blood,* I realized. *And if it cuts too deeply, and hits somewhere vital...* I could hardly look for fear that Lord Simeon would sustain a serious injury. And yet, I couldn't bear to close my eyes. If I did, I

feared I might miss his last moments, which would be even worse. All I could do was keep my gaze focused on his every move.

I cried out in shock as Lord Simeon narrowly dodged a slash of the man's cutlass that almost grazed his shoulder. Thanks to my involuntary exclamation, I suddenly became aware that my mouth was no longer covered. Lutin was holding his breath as well, just as absorbed in the two men's fight as I was. I briefly wondered whether that might give me an opportunity to escape, but alas, he was now gripping my body with both hands, and more tightly than ever. I was on tenterhooks as I gradually came to realize that my mere existence was potentially a pair of shackles to Lord Simeon.

"Vice Captain!" shouted a group of knights who appeared in the doorway. I assumed that His Highness had ordered them to come and lend their support.

However, when they tried to enter, Lord Simeon commanded them otherwise. "Don't move! Wait there!"

The knights, who had taken a few tentative steps into the room, stopped in place. *If they enter the fray now, they'll only get in Lord Simeon's way.* The tiniest opening, a split-second or less, would decide this. Even I understood that much.

Now the cutlass brushed past the tip of Lord Simeon's nose. *Did it hit him?* Lord Simeon adjusted his glasses. Perhaps it had grazed him after all. *Please, God, I prayed, grant him your divine protection!*

Although, looking around, it seemed I was the only one fearful of Lord Simeon's imminent demise. The Vice Captain himself kept up a relentless offense and defense, but on his face, he retained his composure from start to finish. The knights watching from the doorway showed no sign of desperation either. It soon became clear, even from my inexperienced perspective, that the winner was already decided.

Gradually, what had begun as an exchange of offensive and defensive moves on both sides changed into nothing but attacks from Lord Simeon, and nothing but defending on the strongman's part. With swift, careful, level-headed strikes, Lord Simeon forced his opponent back more and more. Soon, the strain was visible on the strongman's face. He struggled to keep his stance, until finally the

cutlass flew out of his hand.



The very next moment, Lord Simeon raised his foot high. With a powerful kick—every bit as powerful as his sword strikes had been—he swung his foot into the strongman’s side. This single strike was enough to knock over the man’s considerable frame. The floor shook as his body landed with a *thud*. Lord Simeon wasted no time in delivering the next blow: an elbow drop, with his full body weight aimed squarely at the man’s vital organs. The giant fainted entirely.

“Arrest him,” said Lord Simeon, standing as he gave the curt order. Without a second’s delay, the knights sprang into action and tied up the strongman with the ropes the police had brought with them. “Now,” he continued, adjusting his glasses again and turning in the direction of me and Lutin, “will you try to resist any further? I’ll tell you now that you shouldn’t expect me to let you escape merely because you have a hostage.”

Lord Simeon’s voice and face remained placid, but the eyes that stared fixedly toward us were cold and sharp like ice. *No, that’s not it. Not like ice—like fire. Like fire that’s reached such a high temperature, it’s turned blue.* His gaze, aimed straight at Lutin, was so oppressive, I felt at risk of burning to death.

This is the first time I’ve sensed true bloodlust in my entire life. I was so taken aback, I didn’t think to even make a sound in response.

Above my head, I heard a puff of breath. “For Dario to be beaten so soundly... Quite unbelievable. You are a monster, Vice Captain.” Even at this stage, Lutin hadn’t lost any of the composure in his voice. I was left feeling almost impressed. Bluff or otherwise, such things were no mean feat. He continued, “I thought the royal guards were mere puppets who stood looking prim and proper in the royal court. For an earl’s son, you are unexpectedly skilled in martial arts.”

“Of course. I am a knight, after all. And as long as Captain Poisson and I are still here, we won’t permit the enrollment of any knights who see that title as nothing more than a decoration.”

“Goodness gracious. Such a pretty face, and yet on the inside, you’re remarkably strong-willed. I feel thoroughly defrauded by your outer appearance. Come, don’t glare at me with that fearsome face of yours. I know

it's pointless to try to oppose a monster like you, so I have no intention to do so. Besides, Lutin only carries out burglaries that are pristine works of beauty. Committing a murder would be unthinkable. I'll even be a good boy and unhand the princess."

He released his grip on me...but only for a moment. The next thing I knew, I was in his embrace.

"Sadly, it seems my only option at this point is to admit defeat. *Adieu, Marielle!*" I felt his breath on my face, but—before I had time to try and avoid it—I felt the pressure of his lips on my cheek. *What are you doing, you thief!?* Briskly, wordlessly, Lord Simeon strode toward us and pulled me away from him.

Then, with a certain hurried feeling, the royal guards apprehended Lutin. Although the knights had captured him, was it my imagination, or did the scene appear somewhat as if they were protecting him from Lord Simeon?

"Unbelievable," said Lord Simeon, as he handed Lutin over to a group of policemen who'd just arrived. Lutin gave a wink as he was carried away. Lord Simeon watched with an irritated pout, then took out a handkerchief and wiped my cheek.

"Lord Simeon!" I protested. "If you rub that vigorously, you'll ruin my makeup!"

"Disinfecting you is more important. Someone bring me some alcohol."

"You hardly need to go that far." But it was already too late. My rouge was rubbing off onto the handkerchief—and after all the work the Three Flowers had put in! *But never mind*, I thought. *I'm sure the party has been called off anyway.*

At last, nestled in his arms, I said, "Thank you for rescuing me." Even once he'd calmed down, he didn't let me go. A sense of relief washed over me. Although I'd been held just as tightly mere moments ago, it felt completely different. I felt safer in these arms than I did anywhere else in the world. Feeling infinitely secure, and deeply satisfied, I looked up at Lord Simeon's face.

"I said to be on your guard," he said. "I wish you'd listened. It was quite

terrifying for me.”

“I kept your words in mind all along. Only, I’d never have expected events to unfold like this. If you knew from the start, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I found him suspicious, yes, but I had no proof. The possibility remained that he wasn’t a fake, but rather the real Cedric, planning a dastardly scheme of some sort. As I mentioned earlier, I received confirmation just in the nick of time. A message was sent to me yesterday, and I left to speak to the Order and the police. We had to set up the plan for catching him as quickly as we could. Lutin would never miss a chance to create a spectacle, so I knew he would execute his plan during the party.”

So that was why he left yesterday. But...does that mean His Highness knew about all this and came to the party anyway? Or perhaps his presence was an excuse to bring royal guards with him, hiding in plain sight?

But I was still thoroughly dissatisfied that he’d said nothing to me at all. When I voiced this, Lord Simeon said, “Yesterday we weren’t talking, correct?”

“You could have told me this morning,” I replied, my words rather pointed.

Pouting, he said, “I didn’t know how seriously you’d have listened if I did tell you. You seemed to be fully entrenched in Cedric’s camp.”

How dare he! ...Well, it’s true, he did have me completely fooled. I was so drawn in by Lutin’s complete pack of lies that I even let myself be sympathetic to his cause. Ugh, even thinking about it is so frustrating!

“...You’re so mean,” I said at last.

“Not as mean as you,” he replied.

“Me? In what way am I mean!? What an inexcusable thing to say!”

“You’re not intentionally malicious, I’m sure... But I suspect you may not always be aware of my feelings.”

“You’ve caused me some rather intense feelings as well, Lord Simeon! Don’t think that some boxes of sweets are enough to make up for it!”

“You’re hardly in a position to say such a thing! You’re the one who—”

Our argument was cut short by the sound of a throat being cleared very loudly indeed. We both regained our senses and turned in its direction. In the doorway, looking very fed up, stood His Highness. His arms were folded across his chest. “How long do you intend to keep that up? The others have all left.”

Only when he said that did I notice that we were the only ones left in the room. Even the policemen that were lying knocked out on the floor had either come to or been carried away. Either way, they were all gone. Out in the corridor, Alain and several other knights had gathered in a cluster and were peering in on us with strangely deadpan expressions.

“I apologize, Your Highness,” said Lord Simeon, gathering himself together. “Marielle, let us depart.”

“Oh, uh, yes!” I replied, and together we went out into the corridor.

There, His Highness asked, “Well then, Miss Marielle. How did you find it, being a cat whom curiosity almost killed?”

Is that intended as some kind of rebuke? I wondered. *How did it feel... My true feelings at this moment...*

“...It filled me with fangirl joy,” I told him at last.

“Eh?” he replied, with a very puzzled expression.

Beside him, Lord Simeon pressed a hand to his forehead.

As the throes of excitement built up in me, I at last abandoned all reserve and gave in to them. “I understand that it was dangerous. Even in the moment, I fully understood that this was not a game. I’m truly glad that I’m still safe, and I mean that from the bottom of my heart. And yet... And yet...! It made me fangirl so intensely! This was the duel of my dreams, come to life! A breathtaking battle! The Vice Captain, seething with unbridled bloodlust! I’m fangirling so hard... I’m so moved... I’m thankful to God for my very existence that led to this moment!”

I couldn’t contain it, even knowing that there were people around to see. This blaze of fangirl fire, the sheer thrill of it all, was so intense that I couldn’t help but scream about it. *I wish I could put it all down on paper right this instant! Lord Simeon truly is the best! I’m too happy for words!*

“Simeon...” began His Highness.

“Don’t say another word,” he replied. “I’ve already reached a state of enlightenment when it comes to this.”

“For that, I have the deepest level of respect for you. Although I fear I’d rather do anything but follow in your unenviable footsteps.”

As a quick aside, I’ll mention that Agnès Vivier later received a great deal of praise for the visceral impact of her knight dueling scene.

Chapter Six

“Mysterious Thief Arrested at Last!”

“Vice Captain’s Glorious Achievement: Lutin’s Plans Foiled!”

“Lutin Dug Own Grave with Over-the-Top Performance!”

“Fans in an Uproar! Ladies Lament Their Loss!”

From tabloid to broadsheet, the front page of every paper was occupied by the same story. The news spread through the city of Sans-Terre in the space of that one night, and was now making its way across all of Lagrange. On every street corner and in front of every theater, newspaper boys bellowed the headlines, day after day.

The circus tent in the park disappeared, incidentally. When the police went to conduct a raid, it had already vanished without a trace. Every performer and animal was gone, and no one knew where. A smooth getaway.

In the end, the only ones arrested were Lutin himself—the mastermind of the operation—and his accomplice, the strongman. Still, though one might say “only” two were arrested, just one of them was needed to fulfill the police’s dearest wish, so Commissioner Doumergue seemed fully satisfied. He didn’t care about catching any silly little underlings.

The party, of course, was halted as soon as the truth came to light, and the earl and countess underwent a great deal of shock. Given their advanced years, this caused some concern, but they did manage to recover as time passed. However, the earl lost a great deal of his vitality, and was no longer able to assault his relatives and servants with such vicious words of admonishment. This sparked mixed feelings in me: was it something to be glad about, or was it rather an unnerving thing for his fire to be so diminished?

The one who took over management of the manor’s daily affairs was, in fact, Lady Monique. Following the incident, she did a surprisingly thorough job of bringing the servants back in order and taking on the leadership mantle from

the earl and countess. In the end, it seems she was not a feeble widow, unable to stand her ground and exert her will in the face of her oppressive in-laws.

Of course, Lord Simeon attracted quite some censure from the Pautrier family. They were not pleased that he'd let them go ahead with the party, revealing nothing of what he knew. However, he coolly explained to them exactly what he'd told me. It had taken time to find out for certain, and if they wanted to catch Lutin off guard and truly take him down, there was no other way but to let him carry out his plan. Even the police commissioner and His Highness were accepting of this, so House Pautrier could do nothing but quietly back down as well.

Lord Patrice was—thank goodness—disinherited at last. Even if Lutin had taken advantage of him, it was indeed true that he was planning to carry out his own theft as well. I dutifully fulfilled my promise to Mr. Danton that I would tell his father, so Baron Bernier apparently chided him rather harshly, as did his older brother. Finally, he was pushed out, forced to leave his family behind.

According to the rumor mill, he joined the army after that. Given the status (or lack thereof) that he was left with, though, I seriously doubt he could have become an officer. And if he, a young gentleman with a penchant for gambling and women, were to be mixed in with the roughest, coarsest, lowest-ranked soldiers... All I could do was wish him luck from afar.

And don't worry about Eugenie. She found the favor of a young banker, so she cried no tears over this loss.

I walked through the park, along paths lined by trees that had by now lost almost every one of their leaves. I decided to buy an ice cream from a nearby stand. It was a decidedly frosty food choice for such a chilly time of year, but it was one of the things Sans-Terre was famous for in winter.

If it got a tiny bit colder, it would be possible to go ice skating. I wondered if Lord Simeon would accompany me.

I sat down on an empty bench and ate my ice cream, thinking to myself that no matter what dramatic events occurred, the world and its people seemed to have the same air to them as always. Young couples made their way past me,

and children were playing all around me with excitement. I even spotted some grandchildren walking with their grandparents.

I recalled my first sight of the real Lord Cedric, when he subsequently visited House Pautrier at last. Unlike the Lord Cedric I'd known, he came across entirely like an ordinary young commoner.

It struck me that Lutin's transformational artistry really was impressive. The hairstyle, even the facial features, were exactly right. Looking at the real Lord Cedric, his charming, clean-cut appearance was almost eerily familiar. But the facial expression that appeared on them, and his entire bearing, were completely different.

Apparently, he had indeed refused to rejoin the family all along...but the reason was somewhat different than the one I'd heard.

"My father already refused outright ten years ago," the real Lord Cedric explained to his grandparents. "You told him that if he left my mother, his disinheritance would be rescinded, and I would be acknowledged as the heir. But who would ever agree to that? When my father left this family, he threw away his social position and any claim to the fortune, and he never wanted either of them back. And I don't want them either. I'm happy with my life the way it is. As long as I work hard, I never go hungry. Besides, I'm not a child. Just because my parents have died doesn't mean I need someone else to take care of me. Anyway, the only reason you asked me is because you need a successor, isn't that right? Stop forcing your problems onto me. It's not doing me any favors."

On that day, when he met his grandparents for the first time, the eyes he turned on them were full of nothing but simmering rage. All attempts to change his mind fell on deaf ears. He planned to simply say what he had to say, then go back to Linden.

The only thing that stopped him in his tracks was catching sight of Lady Monique. "Are you...my aunt?" he asked. "The wife of my dad's older brother?"

"Yes," replied Lady Monique with a nod.

Lord Cedric took something out of his pocket and handed it to her. "This belongs to you, I believe."

Lady Monique's eyes grew as wide as saucers as he presented her with the small ring box. I'd had the chance to see it at close range as well, as I recalled. She opened it, and indeed, the emerald ring was inside.

The actual target of Lutin's burglary, which he'd stolen in the fracas, was the Shilin incense burner. However, separately from that, he also had the ring, as Countess Simone had gifted it to him. After his arrest, this was returned to the family, and the butler had confirmed that nothing else was missing. I wondered how the ring had ended up in the real Lord Cedric's possession. *Presumably this, too, was according to Countess Simone's wishes.*

"I asked what significance this has, and it was clear that I'm not the one who should have it. You are."

She stood there, lost for words. I knew she was wavering over whether or not to accept it.

Calmly, with no hint of annoyance in his voice, he said, "It's something my uncle gave to you, so you are its owner now. You can decide whether to give it to someone else, or to take it with you to the grave. The choice is yours, and if anyone suggests otherwise, you should tell them where they can go."

Tears welled in Lady Monique's eyes, then began to stream down her face. She took the ring and held it close like it meant all the world to her.

It was evidently a dearly treasured memento of her late husband. If she'd been told she had to give it up, it was no wonder she'd had such a dark cloud over her this whole time.

Lord Cedric began to take his leave, but Lady Monique called to him. "Wait a moment, please. I won't try to convince you to become the heir, I promise. I also won't tell you to forgive my father-in-law...your grandfather, I mean, or his wife. However, you are their kin, connected to them by blood. Please, don't deny them that at least. I know that your grandmother, in particular, has always wondered about her grandson. She never stopped thinking about you, no matter how distant you were. They didn't want to welcome you back to the family purely for their own benefit. At least believe that."

Silently, Lord Cedric turned his gaze from Lady Monique to Countess Simone. He looked at her without speaking a word...and ultimately, she looked away

without saying anything either.

But before leaving, he said, “I’m not a noble, but I am your grandson. I could write you letters, if you’ll accept them from a mere commoner. However, I have a job and a fiancée in Linden, so I can’t come here to live.” He paused. “When I get married, shall the two of us travel here? I could introduce you to her. I have to mention, she was born and raised a commoner. She’s a seamstress.”

“Yes,” said Lady Monique. “We’d be glad to meet her. Allow us to offer the two of you our blessing, as well. And...thank you.”

With a brief nod, Lord Cedric left. Countess Simone broke down into tears, and Lady Monique gently patted her on the back.

It was clear that the problem of House Pautrier’s succession would continue to be a source of conflict. Seeing all the greedy fighting relatives, I couldn’t help feeling sorry for Countess Simone, Earl Pautrier, and Lady Monique. This would no doubt be a cause of great anxiety for some time to come.

However, my part in all this was over. Praying from the bottom of my heart that they’d reach a happy conclusion—and aware that His Highness was giving them his attention as well—I left the people of House Pautrier behind.

All sorts of memories washed over me as I sat on that bench eating my ice cream. But, even after I’d finished it, the person I was waiting for had still not arrived.

Just as I was wondering how I would fill the time, I noticed a figure coming toward me. Even at a distance I could see it was a man, so for a moment I thought my wait was over, and I began brimming with anticipation.

However, it was not the person I expected. Instead, it was a young man with a cheerful expression on his face, well dressed but seemingly not a nobleman.

His short black hair seemed to flick upward at the ends in a rather carefree fashion. His tanned skin also strengthened the jolly impression he made. When he stopped in front of me, the face that beamed down at me was strikingly handsome in a way that made him seem very likable.

Why has this man come up to me? I wondered. He’s a stranger, isn’t he? I don’t recall ever seeing him before.

However, when I stared into his blue eyes, I had the feeling that I might have seen him somewhere after all...

“Is it safe for a young lady to go out walking on her own like this? Some evildoer might try to kidnap you.” The teasing voice sounded very familiar, even as it came from a completely unknown face.

“I’m waiting for someone,” I replied. “My fiancé should be here soon.”

“Then I suppose I’ll have to kidnap you before he gets here,” he said in a singsong voice. I furrowed my brow. *I am so sure that I know this man. I feel like I met him very recently. I definitely remember someone who talks like that.*

He grinned at me, waiting eagerly for my memories to click into place. He seemed only slightly younger than Lord Simeon, but despite being a fully fledged adult, he had a mischievous quality about him, a childlike air, as if he enjoyed playing pranks.

Wait a moment, I thought. *Pranks?* “Aren’t you...?”

“So you finally remembered,” he said cheerfully, reaching his hand out to me.

Flustered, I brushed his hand away. “How!? You were arrested!”

“Hmm, yes, I suppose I was. With an opponent like that terrifying knight, I was at too much of a disadvantage, and I was surrounded to boot. I could have tried to put up a struggle, but it would have been no use, so I accepted the inevitable and let myself be taken away like a good little boy. However, I don’t recall promising that I’d continue to go along with it. I’m sure there’s no shortage of people who’d like me to feel the hangman’s noose, and I had no desire to sit around waiting for my trial. I parted ways with the police at my earliest convenience.”

In other words, he broke out of jail. My mouth fell open, and I found myself unable to close it. *Who should I be more shocked by?* I wondered. *The idiotic police who let Lutin escape right after they finally caught him, or Lutin himself, who shows absolutely no sign of remorse whatsoever?*

The only thing I was sure of was that Lord Simeon’s efforts had all gone to waste.

“Is that a glower I see on your face?” asked Lutin. “That’s rather unexpected.”

“Do you need something from me? After going to all that trouble to escape, I’d suggest you get a move on.”

“Have you forgotten? I said I would take you with me.” He spoke in a manner that felt entirely too intimate. “When I told you that, it was an expression of my true feelings. I’ve been intrigued by you ever since we met that day in the circus tent. I’ve seen your eyes sparkle with an innocent curiosity, and I’ve seen you act with bravery totally unlike that of any other noblewoman. Some of the things you did were far outside of anything I’d predicted. You even disguised yourself as a maid and blended in amongst the servants, didn’t you? That was very interesting indeed!”

So he’d been aware of my activities all along? And had laughed his secretive little chuckle? It didn’t bear thinking about!

My hackles were raised more and more as his speech went on. Thinking back, even our dance practice had been one of his schemes. Not to mention the time he’d told me about his memories of his late father! I thought, how *dare* he tell me such utter poppycock in such an earnest manner! What a piece of work. I couldn’t believe I had sympathized with him, even *supported* him!

He continued, “At first glance you appear plain and docile, as if there’s nothing interesting about you at all...but in truth, you have an offbeat way of thinking and behaving. One that makes you too interesting for words. You’re keenly aware of the distinction between your two personas, aren’t you? You know exactly when to use one and when the other. I love that about you. You have that same whiff about you that I do. I’m not in possession of the emerald ring anymore, but I will get you anything you want, whether that’s rubies, or diamonds...anything. So please, Marielle. Come with me.”

“Have you forgotten?” I replied. “I already told you, it’s not jewels that I like, but flowers. And I already have one person to give me those, so I don’t need another. Besides, I doubt there’s a lady alive who’d be happy to receive stolen goods as a gift. To you and your kind, all I can say is: leave and don’t come back.”

He raised his voice in a laugh, as if he truly found this all very entertaining.

“You’re an impressive person indeed. It seems such a waste for you to remain within the nobility.”

Speak for yourself, I thought. Personally, becoming a thief’s mistress would be far more of a waste.

He continued, “Surely you can’t live the life you want to. Not in a society that’s so focused on putting on airs and inescapable ties of obligation. Such a dull and restrictive world must be far too cramped for you.”

“I don’t need any of your concern, thank you. I’m glad to tell you that I don’t see it that way at all.”

“Don’t you? Oh, it would be ideal if everyone were as kind and compassionate as you, but in the world of the nobility, all the beauty you see is only skin deep. Beneath the surface, high society is so wretched that even a criminal would turn away in disgust. Just look at House Pautrier. Every last one of them has as much wealth and status as they could ever need, but they’re still jealous of whoever has more. Their eyes glint with jealousy as they look for their chance to pounce and take it all. People like that are everywhere—let your guard down for even a moment, and they’ll pull the rug from under you without a second thought.”

I silently listened to Lutin’s words, remaining seated but wondering if I was safe there. *Does he really intend to kidnap me? If so, should I try to run? Or perhaps if I cry out loudly enough, people nearby would call the police? But then he’d surely drag me away before they arrived...*

It was potentially a very dangerous situation indeed...but on balance, I didn’t especially feel that I was at risk. I didn’t sense that Lutin wanted to force me to go with him against my will.

As if to assure me of that, he proceeded with his attempt to convince me. “Everywhere you look, people are taking advantage of each other,” he said, “using them as fodder, stepping on them to boost themselves higher. Even the most beautiful women hide behind their fans and spit out hateful words. Behind every smile is nothing but pure contempt. Even your fiancé. From his face, he would appear to be a man of integrity, but he actually has some rather murky hidden depths, doesn’t he? The kind young man he appears to be could never be so formidable. I’m sure he has plenty of other faces as well—sides of

himself that he doesn't show you. You must have your own suspicions, I'm sure. He seemed to be getting awfully comfortable with the Le Comte sisters, for example. And the look he gave me at the end. Those were the eyes of a professional killer."

I offered no response.

"If you stepped out into the wider world, you could live a far more enjoyable life. I know that in your heart of hearts, you are yearning to be set free...to let your curiosity run wild, to act however you please. Wherever you want to go, whatever you want to do, I will make it a reality. I will show you a whole world full of things you've never seen before. You'd never be bored, from now until the day you die. I can give you a life that no one else could possibly give you. A life filled with fun and magic. Come with me, Marielle. I promise I'll never give you any reason to regret the choice."

He offered his large hand to me. His hand hung in the air, right before my eyes. I stared at it for a moment, and then smiled. "So what if he's full of the murkiest hidden depths in all the world? Am I supposed to be bothered by that?"

Lutin blinked.

I clenched my fist and exclaimed, "You've summed up Lord Simeon perfectly! He is a most formidable man indeed. He's a brutal, black-hearted military officer who never lets his guard down. He's a full-course meal of everything I adore! How could I be anything less than fully satisfied with my life!?"

"...What?" In an involuntary motion, Lutin pulled his hand away.

I stood up and looked him in the face. "It's true that noble society has a beautiful side and ugly side! Beneath all the romance lie webs of dark intrigue! Countless tales of human drama unfold all at once. Tales of optimism, of love, of success—but also tales of utter failure and destruction. It's the greatest stage of all, and every possible way of life is portrayed upon it. And I can watch it all from a special box seat. That is my very reason for living. Then, as I fangirl over everything I see, I take those feelings and channel them into my work as hard as I can. That's *my* way of life! I don't have time to go on merry adventures with a burglar, because today, at this very moment, the plays of people's lives are

being performed all around me!”

The playful false smile dropped from his face completely. Lutin just looked at me with a blank expression, not saying a word. Satisfied that I’d conveyed my fangirl perspective as well as I could, I smiled at him once again. “Which is to say, I refuse your offer.”

A moment’s pause, and then: “Ha...haha...” Lutin’s face creased up. He clutched his stomach and burst into uncontrollable laughter. “Ahahahaha! What do you... How does...” He laughed some more before finally calming down enough to talk. “You really are the most interesting girl there is. It’s no use, all it’s done is make me love you more. You can’t expect me to give up.”

“It doesn’t matter. All I can do now is send you on your way.”

“In any case, it seems we’ve run out of time, so I’ll retreat for today. Marielle, the world is bigger than you think, and filled with surprises. I’m confident that before long, you’ll decide you want to take my hand after all.” Lutin briefly glanced to the side, and when I looked in the same direction, I saw a figure running toward us. “*Adieu, Marielle!*” Leaving me with the same parting words he’d used that night, and the same manner of kiss on the cheek, Lutin ran off. He was impressively fast. In an instant, he was a mere speck on the horizon. All I could do was watch in amazement.

“Marielle!” said Lord Simeon, slowing to a stop nearby, clad in his uniform. He was left quite out of breath. By this point, Lutin had already disappeared from view. “How *dare* that common criminal do such a thing!” Exposing his raw anger to a degree that was rather uncharacteristic of him, Lord Simeon ground his teeth and wiped my cheek with his sleeve. “Did he do anything else to you? What did he say to you?”

“Everything’s fine. Just like the night of the party, all he did was talk a load of nonsense.” I took out my handkerchief, since beads of sweat had formed on Lord Simeon’s forehead. *He ran like the wind to get here, all because of me. How could I ever doubt him, knowing he behaves with such kindness and sincerity?* “And I turned him down, needless to say. There’s nothing I’d rather do than stay where I am and admire you, Lord Simeon.”

As I wiped the sweat from his brow, he looked down at me with a decidedly

mixed expression. Once he'd got his breath back, he ultimately let out a heavy sigh and returned to his usual face. "It would be safer if you didn't go outside on your own from now on. It's too reckless. When you leave the house, you should always have someone accompany you."

"No, I think it'll be fine," I said.

"And you say that based on what, exactly? Weren't you about to be kidnapped mere moments ago?"

"He gave no indication that he'd make me go with him against my will. Besides, I carefully estimated how long it would take me to get here, so I assumed you'd be here on time and we'd meet up as soon as I arrived."

I'd got him there. Reluctantly, he replied, "I can only apologize for my lack of punctuality. You see, I received a message from police headquarters just as I was due to leave."

"It seems that all your careful planning went to waste. How frustrating. What are we to do with those sloppy, careless policemen?"

"His Highness is giving them a *very* stern talking-to. Ultimately, all of society's blame will be focused on the police, so there's no need for it to cause us any concern. And there won't only be blame, I'm sure. When word gets out about Lutin's escape, won't there be more than a few cries of exultation?"

"After all," I replied, "for the lower classes, he's a form of entertainment."

Lord Simeon cocked his head, exasperated as ever. I giggled.

We began walking side by side, and he offered me his arm in the manner that had become entirely natural for us. I nestled up close to him, and we followed the footpath around a pond. The surface was filled with birds. When the water began to freeze over, they would no doubt fly south for the winter. Sometimes I wonder if it wouldn't be nicer for them to spend all year in a warmer climate, but I suppose birds have their own reasons.

We watched the birds in silence. I was certain that we both had the same topic in mind, but at last, Lord Simeon spoke first. "We agreed that we would talk, did we not? There are a number of things I hid from you, rather than being open and honest. I suspect that this has caused you a great deal of

dissatisfaction, so please, say whatever you need to. I will listen and give you my full attention.”

I looked up at him, and he was looking down at me as well. I stared into his clear light blue eyes for a moment, then began. “Now that the moment has arrived, I’m not even sure what to ask you first. Ah, but I do know. I need to know the reason you were drinking tea with the Le Comte sisters. The day before the party, I recall.”

Lord Simeon had something of a surprised reaction. He evidently hadn’t expected that question to be the first thing out of my mouth. “I was pressing them for information about Cedric—Lutin, rather—and his movements at the manor. They had knowledge of all that he’d said and done since he first arrived. Since both of them were...interested in him, I thought it likely that they’d been observing him very closely indeed. You might say it was a search for corroborative evidence. The sisters had no idea of the truth of what they’d been saying, but if I asked them my questions while keeping in mind his true identity and goals, I could see the deeper significance of his seemingly innocent behavior. Their testimony went a long way toward confirming my suspicions.”

Just as I’d thought. And I had no impression that this was any kind of excuse or pretext to cover up genuine infidelity. His explanation was matter-of-fact, and his voice did not hold the slightest hint of a guilty conscience. The reason he gave was true. I had no doubt about that.

“It’s a skill I didn’t expect from you,” I replied. “Engaging in small talk with young ladies and buttering them up with flattery in order to gather information. Playing the typical high society gentleman.” I hadn’t intended to make any snide remarks, but honestly, this tactic was not one I’d have imagined him capable of.

He looked away awkwardly. “If need be, I do have that tool lurking in my toolbox. I realize it’s not especially praiseworthy behavior, of course.”

“I’m not saying I blame you for it. Only...when I saw you with them, I was slightly taken aback.”

He paused. “Which part of the conversation did you witness, exactly?”

“The part that was the least fortuitous for me to witness, I believe.”

He was momentarily left speechless. I was certain that he knew exactly which part I meant. His expression suggested that he was very troubled indeed. “I am truly sorry,” he said at last.

Even so, he didn’t attempt any excuses. There was a perfectly good reason why he mirrored the sisters’ attitude and engaged in such casual conversation with them. He’d told me why, with no attempt to sugarcoat it or defend himself unnecessarily. The respectable manner in which he accepted the blame made me quite forget what I’d intended to say. “It’s all fine. Once I’d cooled down, I realized there had to be a good reason. Only...”

I took a moment before continuing. “This is something of a change in subject, but it feels like a good opportunity, so I’ll ask you now. Lord Simeon, do you still intend to continue with your engagement to me? Not because it’s the inevitable consequence of the path we’re on, but because you consciously will it to be so?”

“Of course.” He responded without waiting even a moment, directing his gaze at me again. His demeanor made it very clear that this was an honest expression of his thoughts.

“And you definitely weren’t strong-armed into it by my father? You weren’t forced to propose to me because he’s holding something over you, some secret information?”

“This again? I haven’t the foggiest idea where this notion came from, but I am not being threatened by Viscount Emile in any way, shape or form. If it came to that, do you honestly believe that he could stand up to me anyway?”

“But what if he learned of your true feelings, and was using *those* to influence you?”

“What the devil do you... That’s not...” His facial expression wavered enough to suggest that I’d hit upon the truth. *Bingo*.

I took a deep breath. I had to keep myself calm—none of my inappropriate eccentricity. I wanted to talk about this with a level head so that he might listen with a level head as well. “I’ve realized the truth, Lord Simeon. I know that there’s someone you’re in love with.”

“...Huh?”

“You would marry that person if you could, wouldn’t you? That’s my assumption, in any case. Unfortunately, same-sex marriage is not allowed. And, even if you became lovers and stayed as such, the eyes of society are cruel, and you’d receive very little in the way of understanding.”

“...Excuse me?”

“And with the object of your affections being royalty—the crown prince himself—it would become a major scandal. There’s no way it could be permitted. It’s the type of information that must be suppressed at all costs. Feelings you never intended to speak of...that you planned to take with you to the grave.”

He said nothing in response, so I continued.

“Furthermore, while this is somewhat hard for me to say, the impression I have of His Highness is that...he prefers the company of the opposite sex. Which means that your love is unrequited, does it not?”

I’d found it hard to look at him while I spoke, but I briefly glimpsed up and saw that this face had turned so deathly pale, it was almost blue. *It’s inevitable, I suppose. I’ve hit upon the truth he didn’t want to be exposed under any circumstances. No wonder he’s shaken.* But I had more to say, and somehow I stayed calm until the very end.

“But please, I beg you, be assured that I won’t let it slip to anyone. Absolutely no one! I won’t even tell my best friend Julianne. And of course, I definitely won’t use it as material for my books! I promise you, I will keep your secret as long as I live! The only reason I’ve brought it up now is because I needed you to know that you don’t have to keep it a secret from me.”

“...Marielle,” he said at last.

“Lord Simeon, I support you fully! If there is absolutely anything I can do to help you, to ensure that you can be as close as possible to His Highness while keeping your feelings a secret, I will do it! If our sham engagement is a hindrance to you, I’ll cancel it. If, on the other hand, my presence offers you the perfect cover story, then I’ll marry you. Just tell me what you want me to do. I

want to be the person you can trust, the person who understands what you're going through!"

Lord Simeon opened his mouth halfway, then stalled, lost for words. His broad shoulders moved up and down in a dramatic motion. His face had been shaking, but at this point it rapidly grew severe. A menacing air emanated from him. *This is a bit scary. He's not thinking of...silencing me, is he? No, surely not! I just said I'd support him no matter what!*

In a voice so deep and heavy it could have come straight from the depths of hell, he said, "So you're telling me that would be quite all right with you?"

I gave a firm nod. "I swear to you, I am not lying."

"You'd be happy to cancel the engagement or to go forward with a sham marriage..." His tightly clenched fist was shaking.

I suddenly wondered if I had said something wrong. All I'd been trying to do was show him my sincerity to the very best of my ability!

"Is that the type of marriage partner I am to you?" he continued, his voice brimming with rage. "One where you'd accept any outcome without so much as an objection? I don't matter to you any more than that?"

I blinked. "What?" *What is he talking about? That's not what I was saying at all! When did I remotely suggest that I don't care about him!?*

He snarled, "You're saying that if the engagement were to be canceled, it wouldn't cause you the slightest bother? You'd go along with it with no reluctance at all?"

"That is NOT what I'm saying!"

"Then tell me what you ARE saying, because it sounded entirely clear to me!"

His gaze was so fearsome that my instincts told me to run, but I knew if I left now, there was no coming back. I clenched my teeth, screwed my courage to the sticking place, and answered him. "Why would I go ahead with a sham marriage to someone if I didn't care what happened to them? Why would I devote my whole life to someone I felt so little for? Just because it's a marriage of convenience doesn't mean I intend to simply throw my life away."

“Th-then why!?” he spluttered.

“Because I love you!”

The words flew out of my mouth with all the intensity still in my voice, but Lord Simeon’s face changed immediately. All the violent emotion disappeared, and he was left completely lost for words.

I had the sense that his guard was down, so I decided to seize the opportunity and press him further. “If it wasn’t for the sake of someone I love, I wouldn’t devote my life in the manner I described. You live your life in service to His Highness, and in the same way, I’m prepared to offer everything I am in service to you. I support you with all my might. If there’s any way for you to find even the smallest amount of happiness, I want to help you!”

When I stopped to catch my breath, I realized that my shoulders were rising and falling violently with each breath. *There. I’ve told him everything, not hiding even a single detail. Now he can’t possibly claim to have misunderstood.*

Steadying my breath, I looked up at his face again. But the look on his face now was a surprise indeed. His pale face, which until moments ago had been so deathly pale it was almost blue, was now an impressive shade of bright red. He held his hand across his mouth. His eyes were spinning. It was such an odd reaction that all the words I’d planned to say next vanished from my mind.

Instead, I hesitated a moment and asked, “Are you all right?” I took a step closer and tried to get a proper look at him, but he jumped with a start.

“Uh, I, you...” he mumbled.

How strange. He’s getting redder by the second. Even his ears and his neck are bright red. I’m really not sure he’s well. He hasn’t burst a blood vessel, has he?

“Is that... Are you... Is that the truth?”

“What?” I replied.

“That you...I-I-love me...?”

“Oh, that’s what you’re referring to. Yes, it’s the truth.” Although it was a bit embarrassing to have to confirm this to him after only just telling him moments ago, I found myself replying in a rather calm manner. Lord Simeon was so

uncharacteristically agitated that he sent me into quite the opposite state.

“In...in what sense?” he continued. “Is this another of your fangirl moments?”

“Naturally, Lord Simeon, I could never forget how hard I fangirl over you. I could never talk of you without it bearing some relevance to that. However, that’s not what I meant in this instance. I meant that I love you. That I want to marry you and stay with you for my entire life. That I want to be your wife. But if you don’t want that, I will walk away without hesitation. I would never want to cause the one I love any pain or discomfort.”

“I want that! I want it, so please don’t walk away! Quite the opposite! Walk toward me! I will never, ever say that I don’t want that! Not as long as I live!” He spoke with such vigor, I actually did walk...not away, but one step back, at least.

“Really?” I replied. “Are you sure, Lord Simeon? You truly want to marry someone you don’t love? And a woman, at that?”

“It’s relatively normal for me to marry a woman, isn’t it!? Anyway, you have it all wrong! I most definitely do not have the predilections you describe! The ONLY feelings I harbor toward His Highness are my duty to him as his subject and my affection for him as a friend!”

“Oh. Really?”

What? Is this true? Have I misunderstood? Whether pale blue or bright red, Lord Simeon continued to shake violently. I honestly wasn’t sure if he was telling the truth or not. *But he doesn’t look as if he’s lying. I mean, I don’t get that feeling from him, I don’t think...*

“Yes, really! What could possibly have caused you to misunderstand so utterly and completely!? Well, no doubt you once again patterned it all after some story or other...but please, try to draw a line between that and real life! It’s inconsiderate toward me, not to mention His Highness!”

“It has nothing to do with any story. Lord Simeon, think about it. Even when the Three Flowers of Tarentule tried to seduce you, you didn’t show any interest in them at all. If not one of those three can tug at your heartstrings, there must be something unusual about you. No other man could resist.”

“What kind of an absurd theory is that!?”

“There’s Isabelle whose never-say-die attitude falls at just the right moment to show you an adorably helpless face that makes men weak at the knees. There’s Chloe, who makes you believe she’s as sweet and innocent as a doll, but is secretly a little devil with a very stubborn side. And then there’s Olga, who’s intelligent and level-headed, but also crafts such a relaxed atmosphere that opening up to her is a breeze. Between the three of them, they should be able to cater to any taste in women!”

“It sounds rather like *you’re* the one that’s interested in the same sex!” he exclaimed. “Are you sure you don’t like them more than you like me?”

“I like them in a different way! Anyway, what is your type, in that case? What kind of person are you attracted to? Are you suggesting that there’s someone else who has more appeal for you than any of those three?”

“Fine! I’ll admit, I have unforgivably bad taste in women! I like someone who spends her entire life buried in her own world of delusion, who thinks of nothing but the enjoyment she can gain from blending into the scenery using her own kind of camouflage! An insect that flits around, buzzing ‘fangirl, fangirl!’”

“You like an insect?”

“IT’S YOU, MARIELLE!”

His voice boomed so loud, he was practically screaming. Several birds flew up in surprise all at once. A nearby child let out a joyous exclamation at the sight. Hearing the child’s shrill voice in the distance, I stared at the man before my eyes, flabbergasted. “...What?”

Lord Simeon looked as if he’d used up every last ounce of his strength. He gasped for breath in the same manner that I had earlier. Then he let out a sigh so deep, I feared he might be breathing out his very soul. “The one I’m in love with is you, Marielle. The one I want to marry is you. It’s a taste in women that even I don’t understand, but I truly believe that there is no one else that could ever make me happy. What I wish for, more than anything, is to spend my life with you.”

I understood the meaning of the individual words, but somehow none of them followed on from one another. *How is this happening? I just... What? What's going on? "But...why?"*

After one final sigh, Lord Simeon regained his composure. "I expect that you think the day I came to propose to you was the first time I'd ever seen your face. In fact, I knew who you were for several years before that. Since shortly after you made your debut into society, in fact. I've been watching you all that time."

My mouth fell open and I made a vague sound of surprise.

"At every social engagement, there was a slightly odd young lady who spent her time observing those around her. She devoted herself to gathering up rumors and gossip for the sake of writing some novel or other. I found her very interesting, so I looked for her wherever I went. It wasn't until after we got engaged that I realized I didn't merely find you interesting. My feelings had, at some point, turned into romantic longing. Still only subconsciously aware of that, I put myself forward as a suitor when talking to Viscount Emile. His Highness got thoroughly fed up with how long it took me to put two and two together."

I was completely lost for words. *What? What? Whaaaaaat? No way! This can't be the truth... Can it!?*

If it is, that means...this is the most classic plot twist in the history of the world! "Secretly, it was love at first sight all along!"

It can't be, surely!

"Life truly is full of surprises," I said at last.

"Someone confesses their undying love to you, and that's the first thing you say?"

"Well, it was rather surprising." *Sorry, Lord Simeon, but no matter how reproachfully you might respond to it, there is absolutely nothing else I could have said.*

I thought back to Lutin as well. *See? I don't need to go on any grand adventures. Surprises that turn my world upside down can occur right here*

where I am. Life is never boring, not even for a second.

Lord Simeon coughed to clear his throat. “Well, I suppose you’re not wrong there. Anyway, there is absolutely no need to cancel the engagement. Even if you say you’d like to, I will oppose it.”

“In the end,” I replied, “this is *requited* love, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

For a short while, we looked at each other, wordless. Eventually I could no longer hold back the feeling that had built up inside me.

...So I burst out laughing. Intensely. “Hah...hahahaha!”

He eyed me warily. “Is this the type of moment where one laughs?”

“But... Think about it...” I continued my uproarious laughter.

Of course this was a laughing matter! Consider how ridiculous it all was. When I thought back on all that had happened so far, all I could think was: what on earth were we both doing? Both Lord Simeon and myself had made such comical fools of ourselves!

“Kindly refrain from placing the blame on me,” he said. “Isn’t this situation entirely caused by your fantastical imagination?”

“No, Lord Simeon, it’s as much your fault as mine. You could do with having slightly more awareness of what kind of man you are. And what kind of woman I am, too, perhaps. No one would truly imagine that a fairytale romance would emerge under these circumstances. I’ve certainly never come across a pairing like this before.”

“They do say that truth is stranger than fiction. And that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar...but you know, perhaps some flies do prefer vinegar after all.”

“So in this case, it’s you that’s an insect?”

“...It’s just a figure of speech.”

His sullen face as he said that made me burst out laughing again. *In the end, this is Lord Simeon admitting that he’s slightly eccentric as well, right? The*

circumstances don't exactly let him puff out his chest with pride.

"Are you going to keep laughing forever?" he said.

But as he sulked more, it only made it harder for me to hold back the laughter.

"Please, stop that."

"But...Lord Simeon...you're so adorable when you pout!"

There he was. The man who'd said he loved me. The dream come true—Prince Charming, with his handsome face and dignified smile. Sometimes he was strict, and he was often called a demon by those subject to his discipline, but in the face of true evildoers, he was always ready with a cunning trap. Lord Simeon was a remarkable person...strong and occasionally terrifying. Despite that, my words had the power to run him red, turn him blue, make him lose his composure, even scream. He had shown me that side of him as well, and it was so strange, so adorable, so precious to me that I could hardly bear it. It left me overjoyed that I was able to have such an experience.

Yes... I'm happier than anyone else in the entire world! I've never seen happiness like this even in the pages of a book!

I was still unable to restrain my impulse to laugh, but in response, Lord Simeon put a hand up to his glasses...and, in one swift motion, pulled them off and slid them into his breast pocket. Seeing him for the first time without his glasses, I suddenly forgot all about laughing and gazed at him, transfixed. *How wonderful. With his glasses on it's easier to fangirl over him, but like this, I can feel more directly just how wonderful he is. I feel my heart racing.*

But I only had a brief moment to enjoy the view. Lord Simeon reached out his hand toward me and took off my glasses as well. *What? Mine too? But I finally had a chance to see his lovely face! I wanted to look at it some more without it being all blurry!*

But it turned out I would get a very clear view of his face after all. He took me in his arms, and moved closer. Much closer. So close that even without my glasses on, my vision was not blurry at all. Then he leaned down, bringing his face even closer to mine. Now I really had no problem seeing him. None

whatsoever.

But he kept going. *Is this safe!?*

His hair brushed against my cheek. The moment I realized I could feel his breath on my lips, my breath and his were already united.

No matter how many times I'd read about this in a story, or written about it in my own books, it existed solely in the realm of my imagination. As my heart pounded in this beautiful moment, I knew I'd suddenly been plunged head-first into my own real-life experience.

His arms surrounded me, strong and dependable. Noticing that, I embraced him as well. Though I stretched my arms as far as I could manage, they didn't encircle his entire body. His broad frame was so dear to me. The feelings that welled up inside me, from my very depths, were inconceivably warm and tender.



When he finally pulled away, the loss of his body heat against me left me a tiny bit disappointed. However, this did give another clear look at his face, which was a special pleasure. A broad smile spread across my face. Lord Simeon snorted, then gave me the same smile of his that I'd become so used to.

I love his kind, graceful smile. I love how serious and sincere he is. When he needs to be, he can be that formidable man, the one with the dark and murky depths, and I love that about him as well. Sometimes he's eccentric and strange, and I love that about him too. I love absolutely everything about Lord Simeon.

"Now it's not only fight scenes that I can write with perfect realism, but kissing scenes as well."

He replied, "Ultimately, that is who you are, isn't it? Am I to assume I'll be a source of reference material for my entire life?"

"Yes! After all, you're the person I always want to have beside me, so that I can look at you from the closest possible distance. I won't give up this ringside seat to anyone else."

He grinned. "The tickets are sold out, anyway. No one else will be getting in."

We giggled to one another, then lightly touched our lips together again. The birds had returned to the surface of the pond and were clustering around the food thrown into the water by children nearby. We started walking again and took in the relaxing scenery.

I want to keep walking together like this forever. When ice covers the pond, when the snow starts to melt, when the rays of the sun bear down on us, and even when the leaves begin to fall again. Let's watch the seasons change together again and again and again. Endlessly, like the endless story that we'll write together.

You are the person I fangirl over more than anyone else in the world. You are the person most precious to me out of everyone in the world.

And I will continue to gaze at you forever, from the closest position out of everyone in the world—right by your side.

Afterword

I'd like to say hello, both to those who are joining me for the first time, and to the regulars. Nice to meet you! I'm Haruka Momo. When written in kanji it looks like a Chinese name, but I promise you, my name's not Tao Chun Hua, it's Haruka Momo.

I've written a lot of books, some of which are thin and some of which are not so thin, but this book is one with a barcode. This was a big surprise, and definitely one of the top 10 events in my personal history. No wonder I've never won the lottery—my meager amount of luck has all been funneled into this instead.

I started writing this with the vague idea that I wanted to write a totally cliché love story with all the classic tropes. Then I just let things naturally unfold from there and kept writing. I never thought this story would take me so far, but it was a happy occurrence, and one I'm truly grateful for. I'd like to say thank you, from the bottom of my heart, to Ichijinsha for giving me this opportunity, my editor for pointing out issues so kindly, Maro for drawing unbelievably great illustrations, and of course, to all of you readers.

Also, while it might be a little redundant, I'd like to explain a little about the world of the story. In principle, the setting is based on Europe in the late modern period, specifically the 19th century. Simeon and his fellow knights are essentially career soldiers, and the name "knight" is kept purely due to tradition.

That being the case, the Industrial Revolution should have happened, creating a wave of automation that swept across the world. However, personally I find it difficult to fangirl over machines. Shootouts and car chases don't do a lot for me. For me, the true sense of heroism is in the living people's bodies colliding, and the clash of sword against sword.

On the other hand, if I'd set the story in the middle ages, I don't think it would have been ostentatious enough for my liking. It would indeed be an era without

guns, but also an era without fluttering frilly dresses, or men that wore glasses. They wouldn't have toilets, either. There'd be all sorts of missing elements.

That's how it ended up as a strange world where it's apparently the late modern period, but without any guns, automobiles, or steam trains. However, they do have publishing technology, i.e., the printing press. The whole thing is rather cobbled together, I'll admit. Sorry about that.

In the end, I have to ask you to overlook these details and accept it as a fictional history and country.

There is one more important thing to mention. I'm not really into male-male romance. My particular preference is for male-female romance. This is the honest truth. The concept won't come up in the story except as a source of comedy, so please don't have any hopes or fears that it might.

This was a story where I went full speed ahead writing in all the elements I love, including plenty of the typical elements you'd expect in this type of story. I can only hope that you, the reader, enjoyed it as well. If this book made you involuntarily chuckle, I will feel honored as an author.

Finally, I'd like to express my gratitude one last time to everyone who was involved with this story. Thank you very much.

—Haruka Momo
March 2017



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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2020